Savior Complex

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Savior Complex

by yesmilady (AMHC)

Summary

Saving people, hunting things, the family business. His father taught him that.

(Family drama's a bitch, ain't it?)

Notes

PREVIOUSLY:

For Want of a Nail: the idea that a small or overlooked detail can have significant consequences. Basically The Butterfly Effect but without Kutcher. In TWD canon, Carl sneaks into the Sanctuary to kill Negan. THAT event eventually paves the road to All Out War. However, in THIS universe, Carl is taken out of the picture before Negan even makes his debute. And that, my friends, changes everything.

We pick up right where we left off: Carl and the others return to Alexandria but the reunion is bittersweet: the Saviors now rule over everything and everyone, Cas is badly hurt following an encounter with a group of Hunters, they've lost their friend Jake, and his brother Scott has been taken prisoner. Meanwhile, Sam and Dean are on the hunt for Castiel.

Welcome to Season 2: This Time, With Winchesters!

Please make note of the *Author Choose Not To Use Archive Warnings* tag. We won't be going beyond the realm of canon but canon is pretty fucked up to begin with.

For Want of a Nail

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The walker-pit was littered with broken glass. This was a relatively new development.

Daryl followed the rest of the workers into the yard, mindful of his bare feet. Some of the other workers got to wear shoes, but Daryl hadn't *earned* his yet. At least, that was what the Saviors kept telling him.

All the glass had turned the yard into a minefield. The damn salt just made it worse. The ground was covered in it – layers and layers of dry, crusted flakes. Why the salt? Daryl had never bothered asking. All he knew was that it was annoying as shit and made every little cut sting like a bitch.

His jailors would smirk whenever he'd returned to his cell with bleeding feet. "You could make this all go away," they'd jeer. "Just say the word - what's your name?"

Daryl kept telling them – it hadn't changed. It wasn't gonna.

(Except later, when he was alone in his cell, Daryl sometimes caught himself thinking: someday it just might. Wouldn't it be easier to just pretend?)

In the light of day, surrounded by monsters both dead and alive, the chance to join the Saviors had never seemed less appealing. And so he stayed barefoot. Stayed *Daryl*. It was alright, nothing he couldn't handle. The soles of his feet were thick and callused. The bastards could keep their damn shoes.

"Get to work, meatbags!" a guard yelled, shoving the last worker through the narrow gate and slamming it shut, agitating the dead even more than their presence already had. The guards never went into the yard with them.

The worker stumbled, letting out a small hiss of pain. He was young, somewhere around Carl's age, bruised black and blue as if somebody's fists had taken a special interest in his face. Daryl must've passed him around the yard before, but this was the first time he'd noticed the kid's tracksuit was stained with more than just dirt.

Instinct made Daryl catch the boy's shoulder, steadying him. The kid gave a full-body flinch at the contact and Daryl's hand snapped back. He didn't bother asking the kid if he was alright. It would've been a ridiculous question.

"M'fine," the kid muttered anyway, bending down to pull a sliver of glass from between his toes. The cut trickled sluggishly.

A guard called out a vaguely threatening warning. Wordlessly, Daryl and the young worker went their separate ways. It was a big yard, but teamwork was generally frowned upon.

By now, this was a familiar ritual – securing the dead, feeding them, spraying ‘em with salt. Cleaning the filth from between their legs. It was a dangerous, mind numbing routine, meant to break more than just their backs.

(“Boss’ orders, that’s why,” he’d overheard the guards once, casting whispers and furtive glances. “Negan is into some *occult-type shit*. You gotta roll with it, alright? Just keep your head down and you’ll be fine.”)

Yard work was a privilege. At least, that was what the Saviors had told him. For once, Daryl didn't disagree. Better here than in his dark cell, with nothing but his piss-bucket and that *fucking song* for company. And so, like a good prisoner, Daryl had kept his head down. Day by day, he shoved perfectly good meat between snapping, green-tinted teeth, and tried not to think too hard about what he was doing.

They usually fed him after yard work. Usually.

A withered hand made a grab at him. Daryl stayed still, knowing the rusty pike would hold the walker at bay. He sighed quietly, reaching into the bucket of raw meat they'd handed him at the gate.

The walker stared back hungrily, making a low, gurgling sound in the back of its throat. Its face was a gaunt, sunken mess, a haunting shadow of its former beauty.

It was Sherry. What was left of her.

He wasn’t surprised to see her there. Sherry had been dead for weeks. She’d tried to run, they’d said. Traitors and runaways got the yard, they’d said. Her… *relationship* with Negan hadn’t been enough to save her. Her ex-husband hadn’t saved her, either.

She’d been a good person once, underneath it all. Daryl felt sorry for her. Not enough to take her out, though. It wasn’t worth the punishment.

The creature chewed noisily when he fed it, staring back at him with Sherry’s empty, empty eyes. He gave it an extra-large piece, just for the hell of it. They weren’t supposed to overfeed the walkers, but a quick glance at the bored guards told him exactly how much they really cared.

“I'm saying it's a shame,” one of them said, loud enough for Daryl to overhear. “I would’ve stuck Dwight in next to her."

The other guard frowned. His head was wrapped in thick, sweat-stained bandages. “Why? Dwight wasn’t a traitor.”

“It's romantic.” The guard shrugged. “They would’ve been together again, in the end.”

The bandaged guard scowled. “What the fuck is wrong with you?”

Not wanting to draw their attention, Daryl kept working. He grabbed a handful of salt from one of the overflowing bags scattered about the yard and tossed it over Sherry's body like some kind of fucked up confetti.

But his mind was reeling from the revelation.

Dwight was dead, Daryl thought as he cut a path through the yard, feeding and salting the walkers along his path. Dwight was dead, and he was not the only one.

Not that the Saviors had said anything, of course. But Daryl wasn't stupid. He could damn well *count*. He'd been seeing fewer guards recently. Sometimes they'd show up wounded. Sometimes they wouldn't show up at all.

Rick's fighting back, Daryl thought with a sudden conviction, hiding a smile behind the dirty fall of his hair.

Maybe he found the kids. Maybe he found Carol.

He hoped they were giving the Saviors the hell they deserved.

(It didn't occur to him that it might be somebody else.)

A strange creaking sound pulled Daryl away from his thoughts. It stood out from the normal racket—the workers' grunts, the jeers from the guards, the dead straining and writhing in their restraints. The sound was like something stretching, like something that was about to *give*.

Frowning, Daryl looked around for the source. His gaze landed on the young worker from earlier. The kid was managing a strong-looking walker, one that had been bundled up in chains and pinned to the fence at the outermost part of the yard. It was easily a head taller than the kid himself, fresh enough that its muscles had yet to wither away. It had died young, too, its throat sliced in a thin, cruel line.

Several rings in the chain-link fence snapped. The walker lurched, but in a split second, Daryl was there, yanking the kid back before the walker could sink its teeth into his neck. The creature hissed, teeth snapping on air, held back despite the newfound slack in its restraints. Dark eyes covered in a thin gray film glared back with something that could almost pass as anger.

"Woah," the kid breathed softly. Then he froze.

Daryl saw it as well. The walker, strong as it was, had managed to tear a hole in the fence. It was small, just a few broken links near the tension bar. But it was also the farthest part of the yard, where the fence separated the Saviors' compound from the outside world. And now, there was an opening.

No one else seemed to have noticed anything out of the ordinary yet. Daryl turned his head a fraction, watching the guards from the corner of his eye. Next to him, the kid swallowed audibly.

It was broad daylight.

It could have been another test.

"Go if you're going," the kid whispered.

Ignoring the snarling walker, the young worker picked up his feed bucket. As if nothing had happened, the kid made his way to the next writhing corpse, putting some distance between himself and Daryl.

Suddenly, the kid shouted, dropping the bucket and spilling its contents on the salt-crusted earth. All eyes turned to the kid as he yelled out curses, jumping on one leg as he clutched a bleeding foot, ignoring the guards' demands to *shut the hell up*.

Daryl didn't waste another second. While the guards were distracted, Daryl threw himself behind the snarling walker, pushing his too-thin body through a too-small gap in the fence. The broken links cut him, leaving angry red trails along his arm and torso. Daryl barely even noticed them. The cuts weren't bleeding enough to leave a trail, which was all that mattered.

Daryl ran as fast as his feet could carry him, flitting between rundown industrial buildings. It wouldn't be long until the Saviors noticed he was gone. Behind him, he could still hear the kid's shouting, until suddenly, it stopped.

His chest heaved as he made it behind cover. It was tempting to keep running, but the odds were not in his favor. He had been a prisoner for far too long, his body weakened by starvation and sleep deprivation. Adrenaline had carried him this far, but he knew he would never make it out of the industrial park the Saviors had called their home before someone caught up to him.

Not in broad daylight, anyway.

He knew his best chance would be to stay close and wait until nightfall. He could slip away then and hopefully make it to the edge of the nearby woods. All he had to do until then was hide.

But where?

His gaze fell on a storm drain. Breathing hard, Daryl's knees hit the asphalt with a thud he barely noticed. He dug his fingers between the bars and pulled with all his strength, but it didn't want to budge. Determined and more than a little bit desperate, Daryl dug his fingers into the spaces where the cover met the cracked asphalt, using his fingernails to curve out the accumulated dirt.

It worked. Daryl jumped inside the storm drain, his feet sinking into the muck below. He pulled the grid cover over his head just as footsteps rounded the street corner, mocking voices calling out his name.

Something scurried past Daryl's foot in the dark. He held his breath.

The footsteps moved away.

Daryl kept holding his breath until his lungs screamed in protest.

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It was a dark, moonless night. He'd waited an hour into nightfall before pushing the storm drain's cover and raising his numb body out of the hole.

The world felt different when cast in shadow, sharper somehow. The air was crisp in his lungs. He didn't know the exact location of the compound, but the night sky hinted that he was somewhere westward of Alexandria. Daryl had no intention of leading the Saviors back there, not until he figured out what Rick had been up to.

He needed a change of clothes and a weapon in his hand. With Dwight dead, he wondered what had become of his crossbow. His vest was probably long gone. The Saviors burned their dead.

There were plenty of corpses in his path. He managed to slide the boots off a dead man, lacing them tightly over his aching feet. He didn't want to waste any more time on clothes, so he settled for rolling his body in the dirt to darken his tracksuit. The Saviors didn't stop looking for him, but he had his ear to the ground, and in the shadows, it was easy enough to hide.

Once he made it past the edge of the woods, Daryl allowed himself a moment to shudder in relief. It was a brief respite, though. He had a long way to go, and he didn't even know where he was going.

It was still dark when he stumbled upon the small town. It had long been abandoned, with the woods encroaching on its borders, nature reclaiming what had been carved away. Daryl thought it must have been a nice little town once, nice enough that it had never housed any of the factory workers from the nearby industrial park.

Daylight was a couple of hours away, yet Daryl was already lightheaded with hunger and fatigue. The town had already been ransacked, but he could see a church up ahead. No doubt, there would be a kitchen. Some people still got squeamish when it came to "stealing" from churches. Daryl had no such reservations.

It was easy enough to pry a few boards from the window, nails all but rusted away. He was careful to move them back in place once he had climbed inside, loose enough to have a quick escape, but leaving the window looking undisturbed. The church was shrouded in darkness, but Daryl's eyes had become accustomed to the dark.

He found the small kitchenette in the back. Starlight filtered through the haphazardly boarded windows. His heart sank as he spotted the empty cabinets, but he wasn't surprised. It had been a long time since the world had changed. There was no room left for the squeamish.

The next room appeared to be a modest-looking study. The sofa looked welcoming, but Daryl's gaze was drawn to the desk. He could have sworn he had seen something shine there. He approached it cautiously.

The desk was covered in some creepy-looking shit, from the strangely bright white feathers arranged in a delicate row to the book open on some gothic-like scribbling. There were tiny vials with labels he couldn't make out in the dark, a mortar and pestle close to overflowing

with a gritty-looking gloop, little rocks that looked more like crystals, and, inexplicably, a salt shaker.

Again with the fucking salt.

And yes, those absolutely *were* dried out chicken feet. He wondered if they were okay to eat.

Daryl picked up one of the tiny feathers. It must have been a trick of the light, but he could've sworn it glowed for a moment there.

(“*Occult-type shit*,” the guard had whispered.)

Exhaustion slowed Daryl down, and he was too late to spot the movement behind him. There was nothing he could do except freeze when he heard the gun's safety click behind his head.

“Put that down,” came the gruff demand. The barrel prodded the back of Daryl’s head. “*Now*.”

With a long, careful exhale, Daryl allowed the feather to drop from his hand. For a moment, he considered reaching for the pestle, but he was too slow, too exhausted, and the gun was far too close. He felt, rather than saw, the man’s carefully released exhale as he took a few cautious steps back.

“Turn around, hands up. Do it slowly.”

There was a click, and suddenly a bright light shone on Daryl's face. Forced to squint, he bared his teeth in a silent growl. Then, the light clicked away.

“You look like shit,” the unfamiliar man said. It wasn’t mocking, despite the heavy-handed delivery.

They both tensed up when they heard the vehicle rolling up the street. The stranger tapped the flashlight to his lips, signaling for Daryl to be quiet. The car's high beams illuminated the street, but showed no signs of slowing down. The beam landed on the stranger's face for a brief moment, lighting up his pale green eyes eerily. Then, it drove away, as quickly as it had come.

“You can breathe, man,” the stranger said after a long moment. “They’re gone.”

Daryl glared at the man. There was something strangely familiar about him, although Daryl was sure they’d never met before.

The man sighed and lowered his gun. “I’m not with those assholes.” He gestured at his face. “I mean, do I *look* like a bag of dicks?”

Daryl pointedly said nothing.

Unexpectedly, the man snorted. He took another step back, re-engaging the safety of his handgun. It was an interesting piece, with a shiny grip and what looked to Daryl like fancy

etchings along the barrel. Although he had lowered it, Daryl had no doubt that the gun could be pointed back at him in the blink of an eye.

The stranger gave Daryl a wide berth as he circled his way around the desk. He moved stiffly, favoring his right leg. Sitting down at the desk, he reached down to rummage under it, never taking his eyes off Daryl.

“Look, I know a man on the run when I see one,” he said conversationally. “What do these guys call themselves again, the Savers? Jesus Christ.” Straightening up, he dropped a bottle of water and a couple of protein bars on the desk, right beside the chicken feet. “This country, man. Can’t throw a rock without hitting another damn cult. You got a name, pal?”

Daryl inhaled sharply. He'd learned to hate that question.

The man frowned. Then he glanced down, seemingly noticing all the weird crap on the desk, and shrugged. "Would it help if I said this is exactly what it looks like?"

When Daryl didn't reply, he continued. "Listen, man, I don't wanna shoot you. You look like you've been up shit's creek, and anyway, *I've* got shit to do. So, are you gonna eat, or are you just gonna stand there and stare?"

Daryl considered the man for another long moment. It could be a trick, but either way, what choice did he have? Making up his mind, Daryl dragged one of the chairs closer and sat down on the other side of the desk.

"Daryl," he offered, his voice an underused, dry croak.

The stranger didn't smile, but he pointedly pushed the bottle of water toward Daryl. "Name's Dean."

Chapter End Notes

Poor Daryl. Did you notice he said one word throughout this entire chapter?

Please drop a comment and let me know what you think! I'll be honest - feedback feeds into my motivation like nothing else. Real life's kicking my ass, but I'll do everything I can to update regularly.

The Family Business

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The road to hell was paved with good intentions. Or something.

Dean watched his unexpected houseguest chug the entire bottle of water in one go. Snapping up the protein bars next, Daryl proceeded to scarf both down at the same time, his posture hunched as if he believed his meal could be taken away at any moment. He had a wild, unsettling look to him, like a dog that had been beaten one too many times.

Dean kept his gun close, feeling its familiar weight in his hand. Even though he didn't really want to shoot the guy – this beaten-down stranger, looking like he'd just escaped from an overlong stint in somebody's torture basement – Dean still would not hesitate to put him down if it came down to it.

Most people were just trouble waiting to happen. Wasn't that what he always told Sam?

Sure, now and then they would stumble on the odd peace-love-and-understanding, hippie-type commune. But for every kindly old prepper or humble goat farmer they'd encountered, there'd be ten psychos hanging around the corner, living up their wildest Mad Max fantasies.

It was a little embarrassing, honestly.

"So, Daryl," he started in a pointedly light tone, fingers tapping the desk briefly, "whatcha do to piss off the Savers?"

Daryl dragged crumbs from his scraggly beard and into his mouth. "Saviors."

"What?"

"S'what they call themselves," Daryl said in short tone.

Dean leaned back in his seat, ignoring the pain shooting up his leg. That made a bit more sense, he supposed. He *thought* the Saviors didn't seem like any of the many, many, *many* ultra-religious cults that had popped up like self-righteous mushrooms after the proverbial apocalyptic storm. Just the standard cult-of-personality, then. Cool, cool.

They still hadn't met this Negan guy. Honestly, Dean was a little disappointed. He and Sam had been hearing *so much* about him lately.

"What can you tell me about them?" Dean asked, watching the guy for any kind of reaction.

"They're assholes," Daryl grunted.

"Yeah, kind of already figured," Dean huffed. "So… what'd ya do?" Dean pressed, picking up his flashlight for another closer look at the human bundle of misery sitting before him.

Daryl narrowed his eyes, but did not inch his face away from the blinding light. His hands tightened on the armrests of his seat.

Dean switched the light off.

"Underestimated 'em," Daryl grunted after a long pause. He had a short way of speaking, clipped and strangely soft at the same time. "Didn't know any better."

Dean hummed, unconvinced.

He'd seen a lot of crazy these past few years, ever since he and Cas had sprung out of Purgatory, and he'd traveled halfway across the country this past year alone, searching for his wayward angel. He'd spent his entire life fighting all kinds of freaks and monsters, human and otherwise, dead, alive, and anywhere in between, gambled with stakes beyond human comprehension.

So this latest group, these *Saviors*? Didn't even crack Dean's top ten.

Still, what a mess. Just when he and Sam finally had a lead on Castiel's location, these assholes had to show up and fuck it all up. Even after they'd let Simon and that big lumpy lackey of his go, they'd just *had* to come chasing after them, guns blazing, drawing Dean and his brother into a drawn out fight *they had no time for*.

The compass was burning a hole in Dean's pocket, begging to be anointed again. The cuts on Dean's arm were beginning to scab over. He had to keep going. Cas was so close. He could feel it. The Saviors were human, Dean had argued after their second or third encounter, anxious to move on. Why couldn't anybody else deal with their mess?

Sam had *strongly* disagreed, steel in his voice and face splattered with someone else's blood, fresh off another roadside tussle. They'd left no survivors that time, not after they'd questioned the ones who'd surrendered. Sam and Dean had learned quite a bit about the Saviors' *modus operandi* that day.

They were hurting people. Sam was right – they needed to be stopped. The Saviors were human, but they were monsters all the same, and Winchesters slew monsters.

Dean sighed, long and hard. He holstered his faithful ivory-handled colt, hoping he wouldn't come to regret this decision. The injury in his leg sent a jolt of pain through his body, which he steadfastly ignored. The tension in Daryl's shoulders eased a fraction.

"Well, trust me on this one, they won't bother you for much longer," said Dean, trying and failing to imitate the soothing tone of voice Sam would've used with a traumatized victim.

That only seemed to irritate Daryl. "Yeah? And who the hell are you?"

Dean shrugged. "Just a guy doing a job."

Saving people, hunting things, the family business. His dad had taught him that.

Daryl's gaze flicked to the letter opener on the desk, passing over all the spell ingredients Dean had painstakingly arranged before his uncalled arrival. Mouth pursed, Dean's hand returned to rest over his gun. A warning, nothing more. Despite his haunted and gaunt appearance, Dean had no doubt Daryl could put that letter opener to good use.

"A job," Daryl repeated quietly, eyeing him wearily.

"Look, man, I was just passing through the area," Dean said evenly, a sigh in his voice. "I'm just trying to find my – " he hesitated – "I'm looking for someone," he finished lamely.

It had been years since Dean had gotten over himself, embraced his bisexuality, and stopped giving a crap about what other people thought of his relationship with a man. Well, technically, a man-shaped angel, who Dean hadn't seen in over a year.

But then, everything about Daryl screamed *redneck*, and Dean wasn't really looking to be disappointed with anyone tonight.

The cavern left by Cas' continued absence rattled in Dean's chest. "His name's Cas," he said, because he needed to, "He, uh, he's got blue eyes, brown hair, always wears this ridiculous trench coat. He's kind of weird. Maybe you've seen or heard…?"

"No, man," Daryl said, frowning.

Dean let out a slow puff of air, resigned. "Well, like I was saying. I ain't from around here. My brother and me were just passing through when these assholes attacked us." He'd slipped up, mentioning Sam. Not that it mattered - Daryl was bound to wonder if Dean was on his own. "We've been mowing them down ever since. You're welcome, by the way."

Daryl's stare was more than a little skeptical. "Bullshit."

"Trust me, buddy," Dean said, smirking, "I'm used to a lot worse."

Daryl let out a small huff. "That why you limpin'?"

"That was a lucky shot," Dean shot back, no longer smirking. He didn't think Daryl had noticed. Shit.

It *had* been a lucky shot, in more ways than one. The Savior who had landed the shot had been fleeing, firing wildly as he ran. One of those bullets had missed Dean's femoral artery by an inch. Truth was, Dean had barely felt anything until he had Sam dig it out of his thigh, and by then he'd felt *a lot*. It wasn't the worst injury he'd ever sustained, but still, *worst timing ever*.

"So where's your brother?" Daryl demanded then, eyes narrowed.

Dean sighed. "Went for supplies. He'll be back soon."

"Hmm," Daryl said, unconvinced. "Area's crawling with 'em."

Dean shrugged. "Dumbass can take care of himself."

Sam had taken off without waiting for Dean, prissily huffing something about antibiotics. At least the idiot had taken a couple of hex bags with him. The camouflage spell worked pretty well, for as long as the effects lasted.

That was probably the best thing that had come out of Sam's latest relationship. They'd met the witch, Myrtle, following up on a lead they'd hoped would help them find Cas. She'd taught them all kinds of neat tricks, like how to make hex bags that shifted people's attention away from them, or stink bombs that weren't *necessarily* magical, but disoriented the dead like nothing Dean had ever seen before.

Too bad she'd broken Sam's heart when she'd tried to eat his dick. That kid had the *worst* luck with women. Dean should've warned him – nothing good could've possibly come out of a relationship with a woman named *Myrtle*.

"So, Daryl," Dean smiled in a way he knew people found charming and his brother found especially obnoxious, "what can you tell me about *Daryl*?"

The man let out a slow exhale through his nose. "What?"

"What's your story?" Dean pushed, not missing the way Daryl's eyes kept flicking toward the door. He wasn't Dean's prisoner, not exactly, but they both knew Dean wasn't gonna let him go unless he knew he was safe. "Help me figure you out, man. I meant it – I don't wanna shoot you." Dean waited, and when Daryl continued to say nothing, he prodded, "*So*?"

"Dunno what you want."

Dean sighed, rolling his eyes. "This ain't twenty questions, man. I can't let you go unless I know you're not a huge piece of shit. No offense."

Daryl grunted, which Dean took to mean 'that's fair'.

"Do you have a group or something?" Dean asked, figuring asking directly might work out a little better. "Any friends except those assholes out there?" He gestured vaguely at the window. As if on cue, another car drove by. They both froze, but it carried on without stopping.

"Hmm," was all Daryl said.

Dean rolled his eyes. It was like pulling teeth. "Is there *somewhere* you can go?"

Mouth set in a thin line, Daryl stared at Dean. "Not anymore."

Dean frowned deeply. "Did they kill your people?"

Daryl inhaled sharply. "Not everyone."

"I'm sorry," Dean offered.

"Everyone's got dead people," Daryl muttered, but his voice sounded too off to pass as calloused. "They'll look for me there," he added after a long pause, looking down at his lap.

“They’ll kill them, I can’t–” he trailed off, breath shuddering.

“Well, shit,” Dean said, rubbing at the crease between his brows. He sighed heavily. “Look, man, I get it. You can sit this one out here, if you want. I don’t got much on me except what I already gave you, but my brother will be back soon. He’ll have supplies.”

Daryl eyed him mistrustfully. “Why?”

“I don’t think you’re a piece of shit,” Dean told him honestly.

He didn’t seem to know what to say to that.

“There’s clothes if you wanna change,” Dean offered, lifting a hand to wave at the door. "The church’s got a storage room down the hall. Think there’s a donation box for old clothes, or something. Honestly, I would if I were you. You smell really bad, dude.”

Daryl gave him another long look before bolting to the door, probably never to be seen again. Releasing a long sigh, Dean shook his head. He hoped he was making the right call, letting Daryl go. For both their sakes.

Returning to what he’d been doing before Daryl had dropped in on him, Dean stuck the flashlight between his teeth and got back to work. Myrtle’s hex bags were a pain and a half to prepare, but they really were goddamn useful, especially if they wanted to wrap up this thing with the Saviors fast. Really, Dean had other fish to fry. Mainly one *specific* feathery fish who had *so much* explaining to do.

The sun was peeking through the boarded windows by the time Dean was done, tying the hex bags together. He’d only had enough ingredients left for two. They were going to need to find more chicken feet, somehow.

"What's this crap for?"

Dean flinched, surprised that he hadn’t noticed Daryl approaching. The man either had a teleporter or was obnoxiously good at sneaking. Either way, it was annoying.

“What?” Dean asked, looking up and spitting the flashlight from his mouth. Now that the sun was up, he didn’t quite need it anymore.

Daryl watched him from the doorway. Dean was surprised to see him at all. He’d mostly expected Daryl to slink away the moment Dean had given him the opportunity to do so. And yet there he was, back from a leap into the donation pile looking a little more human than before.

“What’s all this voodoo crap?” Daryl asked again.

“Oh, just me lucky charms,” Dean said, flashing a grin. He picked up one of the delicate little feathers, knowing it would shimmer with residual angelic grace if he turned it just so –

“Huh,” said Daryl, blinking.

“World’s a strange, strange place, my friend,” Dean said, piling up the feathers and placing them back in their little box. They were running low on angel feathers, too, another one of the hex bag’s ingredients. Dean used to have a feathers guy, but he’d been running low on those, too.

Daryl gave him a long, thoughtful look. Quietly, so quietly Dean had to strain his ears to hear him, he asked, “You really think you can stop them?”

“Damn right,” he said.

Daryl frowned. “Alone?”

Dean leaned back in his seat. “Could use an extra pair of hands.” He pursed his lips thoughtfully. “You interested in a little payback?”

“You’re crazy,” Daryl said flatly.

Dean grinned. “Buddy, you have no idea.”

Chapter End Notes

Motivate a writer - leave a review <3

Copacabana

Chapter Notes

> I posted the chapter and then immediately AO3 crashed. Sorry if you received the notification but couldn't access the chapter! The email system must've also been compromised since it arrived some hours later. Anyway, we should be good now. Welcome back AO3, we missed you!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Alexandria, with its easy access to scalding hot showers, air-conditioned rooms, and charming granite countertops, occasionally made it possible to forget that they were living in a post-apocalyptic hellworld. In Alexandria, teenagers were once again free to barricade themselves with their friends inside their bedrooms and play loud music until their neighbors called their parents to complain.

//her name was Lola, she was a showgirl//
//with yellow feathers in her hair and a dress cut down to there//

Their playlist could use a bit of work, thought Enid. She couldn't help but snicker at Claire's look of despair. Mikey shot them both a glare. He stood beside the record player with his arms crossed, scowling to the beat of //*she would merengue and do the cha-cha//*.

Enid didn't mean to seem ungrateful, really. It was just that, well, when Mikey had offered to bring his record player to their little hangout in Carl's bedroom, she'd expected a little less *cha-cha*.

"Why," Claire moaned, sinking deeper into Carl's blue bean bag lounger. Enid envied her a little – she looked ridiculously comfortable.

"It was either this," Mikey bit out, "or Billy Ray Cyrus."

"Were those the only two options?" Claire choked in horror.

"Yes!" Mikey threw up his arms. "Since *those assholes* stole my records! How is that my fault? I wasn't even here for it."

At the mention of the Saviors, Enid's smile faded. Upon their return to Alexandria, they'd discovered a town plundered of its simple joys. On top of the weekly tributes, the Saviors went to great lengths to disrupt the townspeople's lives. Immolating beds, smashing their electronics, pilfering books and magazines. For no aim but to humiliate them, it seemed.

Enid had wondered why Mikey's ancient record player had escaped the Saviors' petty cruelty. Now she knew. Fine, *whatever*. Barry Manilow wasn't her usual cup of tea, but

honestly – he was kind of growing on her.

Planting a smile on her face, Enid bobbed her head to the cheerful beat. “Don’t mind Claire. She thinks every song needs to open and close on a seven-minute guitar riff.”

Claire rolled her eyes. “I never said that.”

Still smiling, Enid found herself a seat on top of the dresser by the windows. It seemed sturdy enough. On a normal day, they might have hung out on Carl’s bed, but it was gone. Well, the mattress was anyway.

Apparently, the Saviors didn’t allow anyone to go out and get new beds. Instead, the town got creative. These past few nights saw Enid sleeping on a giant pineapple-shaped pool float. She had no idea where Olivia had even *found* the thing. It kept deflating throughout the night. Enid wondered if Carl might be interested in a trade-off. After all, he kept complaining about his dumb bean bag.

“We can talk now, right?” Mikey asked. He pointed at the record player. “Are you *sure* this is even necessary?”

Enid shrugged. “Cas has really good hearing,” she reminded him. “Actually, could you turn the volume up a bit?”

He shook his head. “Not really. I mean, it’s an old player. It doesn’t get much louder than this.”

Enid and Mikey looked at Claire for confirmation.

Claire shifted in her sunken seat. “I guess it’s fine.”

“You don’t know?” Mikey frowned. “Didn’t he, like, possess you once?”

Claire gave him an incredulous look. “Yeah, once. For five minutes. When I was, like, *twelve*. Give me a break.”

“Hey, this was your idea,” Mikey pointed out. “I was fine passing notes, you know.”

Enid grimaced. Even since Castiel had woken up in Alexandria’s infirmary, she and her friends had been communicating with each other in writing, mindful of the angel’s excellent hearing. It reminded Enid of their time in Heaven, passing notes to avoid the attention of their jailors. Only this time, Castiel wasn’t in on it.

Yes, he knew about the Saviors, but they’d kept him in the dark about everything else. Castiel didn’t know about Jake’s murder, or about Scott’s kidnapping. He thought the twins had *left*. On their own volition. Because Enid and her friends had *lied* to him. They’d been lying to him for days.

Enid didn’t mind lying to the townspeople – they were nowhere near ready to hear about an angel in their midst – but she *hated* lying to Cas.

Enid let out a soft exhale. “Maybe it’s time, Claire.”

“He’s still recovering,” Claire was quick to argue, already shaking her head. “It’s too soon.”

“I saw him switch off the light yesterday. Without even touching anything,” said Mikey in a placating tone. He looked at Enid for a second and offered her a slight nod. They both knew who among them needed convincing. “He couldn’t do that before, right?”

Claire’s nostrils flared. “Yeah,” she said sarcastically. “That’s *really* impressive. I bet the Saviors will be just *terrified*.”

“Can *you* do that?” Mikey asked, scowling.

Claire’s eyes narrowed. With a bit of effort, she stood up – the bean bag did not leave much room for grace – and picked up a foam ball from a cluttered side table. Then she threw it at the light switch. The room darkened, but not by much. There was plenty of light pouring from the windows.

“There, not touching it!” Claire announced, hands on her hips. She frowned as *Copacabana* ended and *Mandy* began to play.

Mikey crossed his arms. “You’re really mean today, you know that?”

Enid was about to interject, but something outside caught her attention. The town was in high spirits that day, with more people out and about than usual. Among them was a familiar hat-and-stomp who was clearly heading their way.

“Carl’s coming back,” Enid announced, stomach sinking. He didn’t look very happy, although Enid really couldn’t say she was surprised. Carl and his dad had been butting heads since the moment they’d been brought back to Alexandria.

“Already?” Claire asked, frowning.

Moments later, the door swung open with a loud bang. Carl stormed into his bedroom, wearing a deep scowl and carrying… maple syrup?

“How’d it go?” Enid asked, as if she could not already tell.

“Awful,” Carl replied, kicking the door shut behind him. “Dad’s not listening to me at all.”

“Daddy issues again?” Claire teased.

Carl glared. “Like you’re one to talk.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Claire bristled.

“Will you take it down a notch?” Enid asked, starting to get annoyed by everyone’s sour moods. “Carl – what did you find out?” She waved at the bottle of maple syrup in his hand. “And what’s up with–?”

Sighing loudly, Carl collapsed into the bean bag Claire had just vacated. His hat fell off his head, but he didn't bother picking it up. He dropped the bottle of maple syrup to the floor. "Dad's in the storeroom. He's making sure *everyone* gets their fair share." Carl scowled.

Enid frowned. "So?" she asked, confused.

The town was in good spirits today thanks to Aaron and Eric. The couple had returned from a long supply run, bringing back the motherlode of all finds – some dead prepper's untouched stash. Alexandria was running on a high of canned goods and freeze-dried *everything*. It was enough to make everyone feel better about their lot in life.

The Saviors' long absence might've contributed to everyone's good moods, also. Still, making sure everyone gets their fair share was part of living in a community. Everything had to be rationed, so what was Carl upset about?

Carl smiled bitterly. "Including the Saviors."

Mikey, who'd been slouching against the wall, immediately straightened up. "The Saviors are coming back? When?"

"Still no idea," said Carl, throwing an arm to cushion the back of his head. "They're packing half of everything into a pallet now. *Half*."

Claire gave an aggravated sigh. Mikey's expression tightened, but he said nothing. Enid was pretty sure her expression mirrored Carl's. It felt so wrong. Aaron and Eric had risked their lives looking for supplies for a town that was practically starving, and yet the Saviors got to take half of it. And they'd been doing that for – what, weeks? Months?

"Dad thinks the Saviors are gonna show up eventually." Carl snaked a finger into the bandage covering his eye and scratched his cheekbone. "No sign of them yet. Although…"

"What?" Enid asked.

"Aaron said they'd spotted black smoke rising somewhere northwest. Thought they'd heard gunshots, too." Carl dropped his hand with a sigh. "That's all they know. They didn't think a detour would be worth the trouble."

That part made sense, at least. Enid looked down at her lap, considering. It could be anything, really. It wasn't like distant gunfire was an uncommon event these days. She didn't blame Aaron and Eric for not looking into it. Even without their precious cargo to worry about, no one with a lick of common sense would go and investigate something like that. That was just inviting trouble.

"It could be that army Jesus talked about," Mikey said, his gaze taking on a sudden excited shine. "Shouldn't we, y'know, try to find out? We know they've been keeping the Saviors busy."

"Yeah, well, Dad doesn't think it's worth checking out," Carl grumbled.

"I mean, does he *have* to know?" Claire asked, her voice taking on a note of suggestion.

No one had ever accused Enid's friends of having too much common sense. "It seems like a long shot," Enid pointed out, unconvinced. "We don't know who these people are."

"It's an opportunity," Carl stated simply. He was staring up at the ceiling, not addressing any one of them in particular. "This army, whoever they are, they're keeping the Saviors distracted, right? So maybe this is just the right time for us to get a shot at Negan. I could do it – I know how to get to Sanctuary, the twins took me there. If I could just find a way inside, maybe I could catch Negan off guard – "

"Dumb," Claire interrupted his musings. "First of all, you haven't got any firepower. And even if you did – " she covered one of her eyes – "you don't exactly shoot straight."

Carl lifted himself to his elbows, glaring. "At least it's a plan."

"It's a *dumb* plan," Claire said dryly.

Mikey huffed. "What *do* you want to do, then?" he demanded, shifting his weight from foot to foot. He probably would've paced, if there was enough room for it. "The Saviors could show up any minute. We don't know what they know – we're basically sitting ducks! I really think it's time we talked to Cas. Maybe he could – "

"What?" Claire snapped. "Puke on them?"

Mikey pinched the bridge of his nose, letting out a noise of annoyance. "You're treating him like a kid."

Claire drew a hissed breath. "I know Cas," she said in a dangerously soft voice. "Longer than you. If you tell him what really happened, *he'll leave*." She let out a humorless laugh. "He can barely walk, Mikey. Do you really think he can fight the Saviors?"

"I think he deserves to know what happened to Jake," Mikey stated, eyes narrowed.

"We'll tell him," Claire said hurriedly, her face reddening with the effort of keeping her emotions in check. "But not yet. Mikey, he's not well yet. He's gonna get himself *killed*."

"He's not your dad, Claire!" Mikey suddenly exploded, making them all flinch. His fists, clenched at his sides, were shaking. "We're just wasting time, sitting around here doing *nothing*. God knows what those bastards have been doing to Scott – "

"Keep your voice down!" Claire hissed.

"Guys…" Carl started to say, sitting up in his bean bag. He looked concerned.

"I never agreed to keep it a secret!" Mikey shouted, his face splotched with red. "You're just gonna make us sit back with our thumbs up our asses – "

"*Make you*?" Claire demanded incredulously, stomping toward Mikey. "All you ever did was hide behind our backs. Castiel's, mine, *Jake's*. How *dare* you –"

“You’re right – I’m weak,” Mikey retorted, glaring back at Claire without flinching. He was taller than her, but that didn’t make the slightest bit of difference. “And you’re a *freak*, *so what*, does it means you get to tell me what to do – “

Mikey’s flailing hand jostled the record player. The music stopped with a jarring noise before skipping right back to *Copacabana*.

//she sits there so refined and drinks herself half-blind//
//she lost her youth and she lost her Tony now she's lost her mind//

Groaning, Claire dragged her hand across her face. “I’m never gonna get this stupid song outta my head.” She sighed. “Fuck Rico.”

Mikey’s shoulders slumped. “Lola deserved better.”

Claire found herself a spot against the wall to lean on. “I know Cas isn’t my dad.” She hugged her arms to her chest. “He doesn’t even really look like him anymore. It’s not that.” She chewed on her lip, not meeting anyone’s eyes. “I know what Cas is like. He won’t wait around until he gets better. He’ll go after the Saviors, and then what? Right now, he’s *weak*. They’ll kill him.”

“Or worse,” Enid said softly.

It was a constant cause of stress in the back of Enid’s mind. The Hunters knew what Castiel was. They’d wanted to trap him, use him for his powers. And the Saviors had wiped the floor with them. Even worse, The Saviors had gotten their hands on *Victor*, that one-legged British asshole, the self-proclaimed expert on angels.

Maybe Jesus had managed to get the word to his spy inside Sanctuary. But was it too late? Had the Saviors already tortured the truth out of Victor?

Had they tortured the truth out of *Scott*?

Enid brought her knees to her chest, the dresser wobbling under her weight. “I feel like we’re in the eye of a storm.” And the stormwall was closing in on them, fast. It was only a matter of time until the Saviors turned their sights back on Alexandria.

“A shitstorm, you mean,” Mikey muttered darkly.

“I don’t know what to do,” Enid admitted. “What if… what if the Saviors do show up again, and this time they know *everything*?” She fiddled with the ends of her sleeves, an old nervous habit. “Cas is gonna get blindsided and it’ll be *our* fault.” Enid sighed. “I think Mikey’s right. We have to tell him.”

Claire drew a sharp breath through her nose. Then she turned her gaze on Carl. “You’ve been quiet,” she stated, eyes narrowed. “What do you think we should do?”

There was a long pause.

“I think we can stand to wait a few more days,” Carl finally said, a note of apology in his voice. “I’m with Claire – Cas needs time to heal. And I think – I think the town’s gonna protect him, angel or not.”

“What?” Claire asked, surprised.

“Look, he’s already the talk of the town. You *both* are. You survived a bite, Claire, and he’s… well, you remember what he looked like when we brought him in. Most of them think it’s a miracle.” Carl shrugged, embarrassed. “I mean, they’re not exactly *wrong*.”

Enid hummed thoughtfully. “Yesterday, Olivia brought him soup.”

Poor Castiel. He’d put up a polite face while Olivia fluttered around him like a fussy nursemaid, choking down the chicken noodle soup (well, chicken-flavored), looking at Enid with such *betrayal*, like he couldn’t believe what she was making him do, even though Enid had a bowl herself and thought it tasted pretty damn good.

“What about your dad?” Mikey asked Carl, frowning. “He’s getting suspicious.”

“Leave my dad out of it,” Carl said sharply. He let out a sigh, softening. “Look, Dad’s not exactly been stable these past couple of years, let alone these past couple of *weeks*. Throw *Cas* at him on top of everything?” He let out a joyless laugh. “You don’t – you don’t know how he gets. Like when Mom died…” He trailed off with a sigh, covering his face in his hands. “Dad might have a mental breakdown.”

There was a short pause. “He’s your leader,” Claire stated, somewhat tentatively.

Carl dropped his hands and glared. “He’s been through a lot. He’s done a lot. Look around you, Claire. We’re not – we’re not exactly swarming with therapists, are we?”

The back of Claire’s head thumped the wall. “Let’s be real – everybody needs therapy these days.”

“Denise was a psychiatrist,” Enid sighed, not sure why she was evening bringing that up.

Carl smiled sadly. “Yeah.” He stretched his arm so he could pick up the stress ball from the floor. He squeezed it solemnly. “Hey,” he suddenly perked up. “Why are we listening to Barry Manilow?”

Claire shot him a glare of disbelief. “You’re just noticing now?”

He frowned. “I have a lot on my mind.”

The view from Carl’s window caught Enid’s attention again. Although Carl’s home was located on a dead-end street in Alexandria, his bedroom had a clear sight line to the main road. Enid squinted, leaning closer to the window.

Yes, that was definitely Castiel stumbling out of the infirmary in his ragged blue coat, walking around like he hadn’t been given clear and strict instructions to stay put and *rest*. Even from this distance, it was easy to see that he was struggling.

Eyes narrowed, Enid thought she might as well try something. She lifted a hand to her temple, just like any self-respecting psychic in pretty much any movie that had ever *ever* existed –

“What are you doing?” Carl wondered.

“Shh.”

– and concentrated on her inner voice, picturing sending a broadcast of her thoughts across the room, across the street, maybe across the entire town. Taking a long, deep breathe, Enid called out in her mind:

Sup, Cas?

Castiel stopped in his tracks. Slowly, he turned around, seeking her out. Enid gave him a friendly wave. She winced in sympathy when Claire pulled up to the window and, spotting Castiel, practically growled.

“That *jackass*.” Claire’s breath fogged up the glass. “He *knows* he’s not supposed to be out of bed. Where the hell is he going?” She turned her glare to Enid. “Were you *praying*?”

Enid let out a long sigh. They’d been over this a million times. “It’s *telepathy*.” Then, ignoring Claire’s spluttering, Enid jumped off the dresser and made her way out the door, pulling Claire behind her.

She had a feeling Castiel was going to need a rescue.

Chapter End Notes

I hope you all enjoyed the chapter! Please leave a comment if you can. If you don't - the terrorists win 😅

The Casserole Brigade

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Enid was used to the whispers.

When she'd first arrived in Alexandria, Deanna had welcomed her with open arms – a quiet, traumatized teenager who had survived the world outside their walls. She'd been assigned a place to live (with Olivia in a charming townhouse above the armory), a job (organizing the pantry and making deliveries to the elderly residents) and even friends ("Hey, how's it going? I'm Ron and this is Mikey. Um, Enid, right?")

Enid remembered how Deanna's sharp eyes had sparkled. "Don't mistake our hospitality for charity, Enid. You're a survivor; this community needs survivors."

Those first few weeks had gone by in a strange blur. Enid remembered bits and pieces, as if they'd happened to someone else. Falling apart in the shower. Powdered scrambled eggs and stale cornflakes. Making out with Ron on his parents' bed. Afternoon math lessons with Mrs. Miller. The pool table in Mikey's basement –

("I think he's gay," Ron told her in secret. "Not that I have a problem with that! It's just… look, we're already dealing with Aaron and Eric. It's a small town – not everybody's so open minded, you know?")

– pretending not to hear her name whispered in secret conversations.

("Did you know she saw her parents get eaten? Poor girl, no wonder she doesn't talk. I heard there wasn't even anything left behind to turn.")

For a while, Enid had been the talk of the town. Not that Alexandria was big enough to be called a town. No, it was more of an all-American suburban neighborhood, thrusted into a post-apocalyptic reality. Alexandria's residents, haunted by a constant existential dread, took comfort in the most basic form of human entertainment: gossip.

Coming back to Alexandria brought all those memories to the forefront of Enid's mind. It seemed like she was right back where she started, a traumatized teenager once more. Back in Alexandria; back in the limelight. At least this time she didn't have to face it alone.

"Ignore them," Enid whispered to Claire as they passed a few curious onlookers along their way. "Let's just find Cas. If we're lucky, the Casserole Brigade hasn't got to him yet."

Claire gave her a baffled look. "The *what*?"

"You'll see."

As the two pulled into the main road, they spotted Castiel. Even from a distance, he looked dazed, shuffling ahead like a walker without prey. It didn't take long for somebody to come

to his aid. Leaving her post in the storeroom, Olivia hurried to catch Castiel right as he stumbled. She pulled his arm around her shoulder, calling out for help as she did.

Help arrived in the form of one Rick Grimes. Enid swore under her breath. The only reason they'd left Castiel alone that morning was because Rick was supposed to be busy. They'd never counted on Castiel literally falling into his hands.

Enid caught Claire by the wrist, stalling her. "You gotta be normal about this," she whispered, mindful of the onlookers.

Huffing, Claire shook off her hold. "Just watch me."

Up ahead, Rick and Olivia all but dragged Castiel towards the storeroom house's front porch. They got him to sit on the steps without much resistance. Olivia kept her hand on Castiel's shoulder, holding him upright. He looked incredibly off-putting dressed in his ragged, blood-stained coat, oblivious to the heat and the scent of human sweat permeating the air.

If he'd hoped to avoid attention, he sure had picked a lousy time for a stroll around the neighborhood. On restocking days, many of Alexandria's residents liked to stick around the storeroom, hoping to barter for better rations in exchange for labor or other trade goods. Castiel was drawing a bit of an audience, although most of them at least had the decency to pretend otherwise.

Enid couldn't begrudge their curiosity. They'd all watched Castiel being carted into town, unconscious and mortally wounded, a chunk of his face literally chewed off. And yet there he sat, looking like hell warmed over, sure, but clearly recovering, with a face that was merely *bruised* instead of torn open. How could anyone explain that?

Hoping Claire would follow her lead, Enid found her seat next to Castiel. He looked awful, shoulders down and slumped like it pained him to look up. Plastering a look of concern on her face wasn't difficult, all things considered.

"You shouldn't be out of bed, dummy," said Enid and took his hand in hers, squeezing it reassuringly.

Startled, Castiel lifted his head. "Enid?" he rasped.

"Hey." Enid smiled and squeezed his hand again. Focusing her thoughts, she sent out a pseudo-prayer: *Alright, listen up. We don't want any trouble with Rick today. Whatever he asks, just tell him you don't remember, okay? Just say: I don't remember.*

Castiel gave her a look of bewilderment, so she was pretty sure he got the message.

It was Claire's turn to join them on the wooden steps. Tossing her blonde hair over her shoulder, she plopped down on Castiel's other side and leaned back on her elbows, wearing an expression of bored indifference. Enid knew Claire well enough to know that she was secretly fuming.

“Hey guys,” Claire said oh-so-casually, stretching her legs. As she did, she ‘accidentally’ knocked Rick’s leg off the bottom step, which he’d been leaning on. “Sorry,” she offered unconvincingly.

Rick let out a quick exhale, eyes narrowed. “You two got here quick,” he stated, flicking his gaze between Claire and Enid, the latter trying her best not to squirm under Rick’s calculating gaze.

Rick had never really bought into their ‘kidnapped by a cannibal’ story. Which was ironic, considering *that* part was technically true. Unfortunately, Claire’s concern over Castiel tended to manifest in hostility, which wasn’t doing them any favors either.

Ugh, where the hell was Carl when they needed him? Was that damn bean bag really that comfortable?

“It’s such a nice day for a stroll,” Claire replied with a tight smile before bumping Castiel’s shoulder with her own. “Isn’t that right, Cas?”

Castiel merely grumbled in response. Clearly in pain, he at least seemed oblivious to the rising tension. Small mercies, Enid thought. They could have a celestial-level incident on their hands if Castiel thought for one second he’d needed to protect Claire from Rick Grimes.

“I was under the impression *Cas* here was tryin’ to leave,” Rick drawled, eyeing Castiel in a way that was entirely too predatory for Enid’s liking. “In a big hurry, too. Am I wrong about that?”

Castiel dragged his face out of his hand to respond. “I don’t remember.”

Something tightened around Rick's eyes. He looked tired. “Which part?” Rick asked. He sounded tired, too.

“Pick one,” Castiel grumbled.

Don’t antagonize him, Enid scolded Castiel silently. *It may not seem like it now, but Rick’s not someone to underestimate. We shouldn’t be giving him or anyone else around here any more reasons not to trust you.*

The ‘*you don’t have to be a dick about it*’ was meant to be implied but considering Castiel’s stink eye, he’d heard her loud and clear. Ah well, directing her thoughts in a pseudo-prayer was hard enough without having to worry about the subtleties of *subtext*. It wasn’t her fault Castiel turned into a grumpy baby when he was ill.

“Why don’t we head back to the infirmary now, Cas?” Enid suggested out loud, already snaking her arm under his. “You look pretty beat.”

Castiel gave her an irritated look that said, ‘I’m a billion years old, I think I can handle this wacko dad-cop just fine on my own.’

Rick gave her an irritated look that said, ‘I could’ve cracked this sonofabitch days ago if it weren't for you meddling kids.’

Claire just looked irritated.

It was possible that Enid was projecting. A little.

“Oh, but it is a nice day, isn’t it? It’s good to spend some time outside,” interrupted Olivia, her voice taking on a slight soothing tone. She wasn’t oblivious to the rising tension, just good at pushing past awkward situations.

Enid felt a swell of affection. They hadn’t always seen eye to eye, but Olivia had always done right by her.

“You are looking so much better today, Castiel,” Olivia added, adjusting her glasses. “Although we really should get somebody to look at you. You might’ve pulled some stitches.”

Enid winced. Castiel had never had stitches; instead, he had staples to hold his innards in place after Carl had pushed them back inside him. Just a few days ago, Castiel had taken those staples out himself, which had been both gross and fascinating to witness.

Tell her you feel fine, Enid instructed.

“I feel fine,” Castiel parroted. His voice was like gravel on chalk and entirely unconvincing.

“It was that miracle soup of yours, Olivia,” Claire piped up, her voice deceptive in its sweetness. “It was so good, I swear. Cas thought so too. Right, Cas?” She knocked her knee into his.

The look on Castiel's face almost set Enid off. She coughed into her hand, masking a laugh.

“It was certainly edible,” Castiel offered mildly, probably going for a compliment.

Instead of taking offense, Olivia *giggled*. “You’re sweet,” she said, swatting his arm lightly. Castiel followed the movement of her hand, looking baffled.

Oh, boy.

Rein it in, Casanova! thought Enid, earning a look of bewildered confusion of her own

An argument broke out by the garage’s entrance; something about the trade value of hand soap. It wasn’t long before someone poked their head outside and called out for Olivia to intervene.

“Work’s never done,” Olivia sighed in disappointment before taking her leave.

Enid was surprised, however, when Rick decided to tag along as well. She couldn’t understand why he’d bother with Liz and Anna’s little spat. Sure, they were part of the Casserole Brigade, but Liz and Anna were generally harmless. Rick had been so eager to question Castiel – and now he was just taking off? Something wasn’t adding up.

With Rick gone, a few onlookers took the opportunity to join them. Eugene was the first to shuffle into their fold, wearing that disconcerting stare of his. Next came Father Gabriel, greeting them with his way-too-pleasant smile. And then, to make matters worse, came Raquel and Barbara. The Casserole Brigade… or at least, a part of it.

"It's so nice to see you out and about, Castiel," said Raquel, a long-time resident of Alexandria, a senior member of the Casserole Brigade, and the town's biggest gossip. She spoke his name with a strange infliction, like she wasn't quite sure how to pronounce it properly.

Castiel squinted at her.

Enid suppressed a shudder.

'The Casserole Brigade' was a term she'd picked up from Ron, back in the early days. It sort of stuck. The Brigade was an overly-friendly group of women who secretly ruled over Alexandria. Or pretended to, at least. They made it their business to know *everybody's* business. Even after the Wolves had taken some of them out, they were still a force to be reckoned with.

Enid inched closer to Castiel.

"I'm Raquel," the woman continued smoothly before gesturing to her unsmiling friend. "This is Barb. We've heard so much about you from our dear friend Olivia." Her dark eyes glinted and her smile widened a fraction. "Have you met Father Gabriel yet?"

Gabriel inclined his head. He was, as far as Enid was concerned, an honorary member of the Brigade and as such could not be trusted.

"And this is Eugene," Raquel quickly added, sounding somewhat less enthusiastic.

Eugene continued to stare at Castiel, wearing a strangely slack expression.

"Hello," said Castiel after a brief pause.

"You have a peculiar voice," Eugene stated in a monotone.

"Don't be weird, Eugene," Barbara coughed into her fist.

"Don't mind him. It's just that it's been so long since the town had newcomers." Raquel looked at Claire and Castiel and smiled a motherly smile that was almost, somehow, full of teeth. "We didn't think you'd make it… considering."

Claire sat up straight, her smile tight. "Considering."

Castiel tilted his head, brows furrowing. "Considering?" he echoed.

Raquel's eyebrows scrunched up in a show of concern. "Oh, it must have been terrifying," she said in a low, secretive tone. She leaned closer to Castiel. "The bite? The sickness? I can't imagine what that must've been like. Especially for you, Claire. I mean, you're so young."

Castiel's gaze snapped to Claire, "You were bitten?" he demanded. "Why didn't you tell me?"

Claire gritted her teeth. "I got better."

Gasping, Raquel briefly covered her mouth. "Oh, God, I'm so sorry." She actually sounded sincere. "I thought you knew. Well, it's a good thing you both ended up in Alexandria, isn't it? Any other community, well, they would have shot you dead! We're still a lot more civilized here. Unlike… well. You've met them."

"I don't – " Castiel started to say.

Claire clamped a hand over his wrist. "We're fine now, thank you *so much* for the thoughts and prayers, *Rachel*."

"Raquel."

Claire huffed. "Whatever."

Calm down, Enid thought at Claire and then immediately felt like an idiot. It wasn't like *Claire* could hear her.

Raquel raised an eyebrow. Despite her annoyance, her smile remained saccharine sweet. "It's good that you're taking such good care of your dad."

"He's not my dad," Claire said.

"I'm not her father," Castiel said at the same time.

"Oh," Raquel said, sweeping her gaze over Claire's hand on Castiel's wrist. "You two seem so close."

Claire bristled. "He's my dad's twin brother," she lied with a sharp, insincere smile. "Can't you see the resemblance?" she added empathetically, squeezing Castiel's wrist.

"I see," said Raquel, holding a hand over her heart. In another life, her blunt, bitten-off nails might've been blood red. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to pry."

"Of course not." Enid nodded, knowing exactly how much the Brigade *loved* to pry.

"Well, you both look a lot better. Especially you, Castiel." Raquel leaned closer to Castiel's bruised face and whispered, "Rumor has it you were injured rescuing these poor children. Is that true?"

"Oh no," Castiel said, eyes widening, "they rescued me."

Raquel's lips parted in surprise. "Oh." She looked around, uncertain for a moment, before meeting Castiel's blue gaze again. "They did?"

"They've all been incredibly brave," Castiel rasped with genuine sincerity. "Even in these tough and unfair times, when it's so easy to lose sight of each other. They've never let me down; or each other."

Aww, thought Enid.

Claire looked like she wanted to cry. Or kill someone. With her, it was hard to tell.

"We never would have made it back if it wasn't for you, Cas," Enid pointed out gratefully. He had to have known that.

"I would love to hear that story sometime," Raquel said and for once actually sounded genuine.

Was Enid off the mark here, or was Raquel eyeing Castiel with poorly-disguised interest?

"Over dinner, perhaps?" Raquel added with a coy smile, putting whatever doubts Enid had to rest.

Castiel, who appeared as if a strong breeze could knock him over, blanched at the mention of dinner.

"He's fine, thank you," Claire snapped.

Enid tried to hide her laughter behind a cough, but it backfired, leading to a genuine coughing fit. Raquel looked unimpressed. Claire looked murderous. Castiel helpfully thumped Enid on the back.

"Are you alright, Enid?" Gabriel asked in mild concern. Enid had forgotten he was there.

Wiping away her tears, Enid gave a thumbs up. She grinned sheepishly at Claire, who rolled her eyes. Probably shouldn't tease her, Enid thought guiltily. She could understand Claire's look of horror. After all, Castiel looked like her *dad*.

But, well. It wasn't like Enid could fault Raquel and Olivia for taking an interest. As bruised up as he was, objectively speaking, Castiel was handsome. Which probably meant Claire's dad was. Had been. Or maybe that was just Castiel's oddly charming self leaching through his awkward human suit. It was all very confusing.

Eugene slowly raised his hand. "Pardon me, but is this dinner on offer for everyone or is it more of a selective thing?"

"What do you think, genius?" Barbara snorted.

Dejected, Eugene lowered his hand.

Gabriel took a step forward. "Castiel, is it? After the Angel of Thursday, I presume? It's an unusual name," he inquired with a polite smile, clasping his hands behind his back.

Enid perked up. "The angel of what now?"

“It’s not unusual where he’s from,” Claire said. Technically, she wasn’t lying.

“And where is that?” Gabriel wondered, tilting his face curiously.

“Heaven,” Castiel promptly responded.

“It’s a town up north,” Enid rushed to explain.

“*Way* up north. In Alaska,” Claire added smoothly although Enid knew her well enough to catch the hint of hysteria in her voice. “He’s from Alaska.”

“I’m from Alaska,” Castiel repeated dutifully.

Hoping to change the subject, and more than a little curious, Enid turned to Gabriel. “What does the, um, Angel of Thursday do, exactly?”

Gabriel inclined his head. “If the topic interests you, there is a book I’ve picked up on a scavenging run just last week. It’s called, hmm – “ he paused to remember – “Ah yes, ‘Of Celestial Beings and Angelic Lore’. It has the most wonderful illustrations. Would you care to borrow it, Enid? It’s in my study.”

Enid touched a hand to her heart. “I would *love* to.”

“Well, the name fits,” Raquel interjected with a smile that didn’t quite crinkle the corners of her eyes. “Someone must be watching over you, Castiel – they way you came in… It’s a miracle you’re alive.” She turned to Gabriel. “Don’t you think so, Father?”

“Indeed.” Gabriel smiled. “Although I believe that we’ve all survived thus far has been a miracle in itself. Perhaps someone is watching over us all.”

“We could use a few more miracles around here if you ask me.” Barbara spoke up, her expression bitter.

Although she was a card-carrying member of the Brigade, Enid generally found Barbara less irritating than the others. Rumor had it, Raquel had stopped Barbara from doing something desperate the night her husband had turned and bit both of their kids. She hadn’t been the same since.

“It does tickle one’s cerebral feathers,” Eugene blurted, still staring at Castiel with a complete slack face, like he couldn’t spare the effort. “If you pardon the expression.”

As usual, no one knew how to respond to Eugene. Castiel glanced at Enid with a raised eyebrow only to be met with a shrug.

“Is that a… common expression?” Castiel asked, his frown pulling at the bruises on his face.

Eugene gave a brisk nod. “It ought to be.” He took a step forward until he was standing right in front of them, still staring at Castiel with bright-eyed fascination. “It’s a curiosity – this level of tissue restoration, I’d say it defies the established norms and parameters of human biology – even our understanding of regenerative medicine. Now, these fine folks might be

purty durn content to deem it a ‘miracle’ but I reckon we’re fixing’ to have a difference of opinion. No offense, Padre.” His gaze shifted, briefly, to Gabriel. “Frankly speaking, I see only one plausible explanation.”

“What?” Claire whispered. No one had ever warned her about Eugene.

“Extraterrestrials,” Eugene blurted out, eyes widening slightly.

Everyone groaned in tandem. “Eugene,” Gabriel said with a tight smile, his left eye twitching. “Why don’t you take a walk?”

“Have you ever had an encounter of the third or fourth kind?” Eugene persisted, bouncing on the balls of his feet. “Aliens?” he clarified impatiently when Castiel merely stared at him in confusion.

“Eugene!” Barbara snapped.

Disregarding the priest completely, Eugene lifted his hand and extended a finger. With an impassive and measured approach, he brought his finger closer, seemingly compelled by unspoken curiosity to poke Castiel's cheek. Everyone fell into a collective state of fascination, captivated by the sheer audacity of his actions.

Castiel’s hand snapped up, catching Eugene’s wrist in a vice grip. Castiel’s eyes narrowed.

Enid realized she needed to step in fast.

Cas! Please don’t break the weirdo’s hand!

Castiel dropped Eugene’s wrist.

Eyes wide, Eugene stumbled backwards, swallowing thickly and rubbing his sore wrist. He flinched when Gabriel took his shoulder and firmly steered him in another direction.

“See if they need your help at the gate,” Gabriel told him, not unkindly.

“Wow,” said Claire, watching Eugene awkwardly shuffle away.

“He’s an interesting young man,” said Raquel, smiling tightly. “*Special*,” her whisper was a little too loud. “He’s not as adept at killing those – those *walkers*, you know – but not everyone is.” She leaned forward, taking on a conspiratory tone of voice. “How many walkers have *you* killed, Castiel?”

“11,276,” Castiel answered.

“Oh!” Raquel’s smile wavered a little. She glanced, fleetingly, at Gabriel. “That’s, um, specific.”

Enid’s eyes narrowed. Wait a minute…

“And how many people?” asked Gabriel, unnervingly pleasant.

Holy shit, Rick's put them up to this! Enid directed her thoughts to Castiel, trying not to vibrate out of her seat. *He did! That sneaky son of a bitch! No wonder he left, it was all part of his plan!*

Castiel frowned. He opened his mouth to speak.

Do NOT answer that question, Enid warned, a little hysterical. *The how-many-people-have-you-killed thing? That's a Rick question, I swear it is.*

Castiel closed his mouth.

She rushed to explain. *Don't answer any more of their questions. They're quadruple-teaming you. Rick, the Brigade, Gabriel, maybe even Olivia.* She hesitated. *Probably not Eugene, though. He's just weird.*

Castiel sighed deeply, exasperated. "Why does this matter?"

Thinking the question was directed at him, Gabriel frowned. "I'm sorry, but we must know. If you wish to stay in Alexandria – "

"Who said we want to stay here?" Claire demanded sharply.

Father Gabriel raised his hands in a placating gesture. "I meant no disrespect," he said in a soothing tone. "I understand it might be hard to talk about – "

Knuckles white over the railings, Castiel heaved himself to his feet, face pinched with effort. Enid and Claire scrambled up after him, afraid he'd fall without their support under his arms.

"Easy," Claire said as Castiel swayed in their hold.

Castiel took a long, steadying exhale. "There have been many," he told Gabriel, answering his question at last. He inclined his head and made a dark promise: "There will be more."

"Excuse me?" asked Gabriel and despite Castiel's glaring current weakness, Gabriel took a step back.

Castiel's gaze shifted towards the distance. "Were you expecting visitors?" he asked calmly.

Chapter End Notes

Hope you enjoyed the adventures of Castiel-from-Alaska and his long-suffering surrogate daughters. More soon - I needed to cut the chapter in half since it was getting too long. Seventeen pages too long... God help me.

Fun fact: there are no OCs in this chapter! Raquel is Alexandria Resident 1 who is ALWAYS there in the background. Barbara is the ginger lady who is always watching everyone's kids.

A Little Priest

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Alexandria's walls were tall and sturdy. Forged with steel plates and engineering ingenuity, they formed an imposing barrier, protecting the settlement from the many dangers that lurked beyond.

But not all dangers. Not when Alexandria's gates opened wide before their enemies.

The teenagers had only just stepped outside when they caught the steadily growing rumble. Mikey was the first to notice – and how unfair was that, Carl thought privately, when *he* was the one who'd lost half his eyesight and was *still* waiting to get some kind of super heightened senses out of it – and pulled them both into a sharp stop.

"Woah," said Mikey, eyes wide. "Do you hear that?"

It sounded like morning traffic from back in the day, like a busy highway at rush hour. In the distance, he thought he could hear the familiar creaking of Alexandria's gates opening. It sounded like trouble.

Carl almost smiled. All he could think of was –

Finally.

The truth was that Carl wasn't bracing for a fight. He looked forward to it.

Mikey exhaled slowly, as if to savor the last moments of peace. "Damn," he muttered, shaking his head. "It's gotta be them, right?"

They both knew the answer to that. Alexandria didn't have this many vehicles. The Saviors came, and they brought an army.

"Let's find out," Carl said, already on the move.

It wasn't long before the convoy descended on Alexandria. Saviors leaned halfway out of passenger windows, brandishing their rifles in a show of power. Carl watched the chaos unfold, his stomach churning at the knowledge that this had been going on for months in his absence.

Mikey glared after the passing vehicles. "Do you think they're all born cartoonishly evil, or is that just something they pick up along the way?"

Before Carl could respond, one particular asshole biker revved his engine and charged at them, forcing the teenagers to jump out of harm's way. Hearts pounding, Carl and Mikey watched the biker careen around the next corner, his body hanging nearly parallel to the

asphalt, acting like their home was his own personal racetrack. They could hear his laughter over the roar of his engine.

Mikey picked up Carl's hat and handed it back to him. “Definitely born this way.”

As they neared the assumed meeting point, they took a shortcut between two houses and almost collided with Barbara, who was carrying Judith. Barbara’s face was almost as red as her hair, and her eyes widened in fright. She breathed a sigh of relief when she realized it was only them.

“Michonne asked me to take her,” Barbara explained in a hushed voice, cradling Judith to her chest.

Truth be told, he barely knew Barbara. The extent of their relationship was him helping dig graves for her husband and children. Barbara had thanked him afterwards, he remembered.

“Yeah, go,” Carl said. It was a relief knowing Judith was out of harm’s way. He wondered where the hell Oliver was, although he wasn’t especially worried. The kid knew how to make himself scarce.

The street outside the storeroom was packed with vehicles and people. The biker who almost mowed them down gave Carl and Mikey a mocking salute as they passed. The people of Alexandria gathered on sidewalks and porches, watching the Saviors crowd their street as though they owned it. Most of the townsfolk seemed resigned, although Mikey’s dad had a look on his face like he’d eaten something sour.

“Go,” Mikey told him with a sigh, edging toward his dad. “I’ll catch up later.”

The Saviors didn’t seem to be in any hurry to get started. To no one’s surprise, Rick stepped forward to face their unwelcome visitors. He was unarmed except for the hatchet at his belt and Michonne at his side.

“Which one of you is in charge today?” Rick called out, his tone close to defiant. Meekness didn’t come naturally to him.

"Stay put, Grimes-baby," one of them drawled, a slim man in a sweat-stained tank top. "The boss went to take a dump. He'll be here soon."

“Charming fellas, aren’t they?” one of the town’s residents murmured to Carl as he brushed past.

Not really, Carl thought ruefully, surveying the crowd. He spotted Castiel between Claire and Enid, standing with some of the onlookers. He looked terrible, which was definitely an improvement.

He made to move toward Castiel when Rick caught his eye. His father motioned for him to come over. Carl hesitated, torn between standing with his family or his injured friend. Making up his mind, he cut a path through a crowd of jeering Saviors. He thought he saw a flicker of disappointment on Rick’s face, but he wasn’t sure. His peripheral vision was awful.

"Hey," said Carl, out of breath for no apparent reason. "You guys okay?"

Enid offered a weak smile, but Claire's glare was scorching. "About time you showed up," she hissed.

Claire had a white-knuckled grip on Castiel's arm, ready to drag the angel into the nearest hiding hole if only he allowed it. Despite Castiel's sorry condition, Carl knew she would've had an easier time squaring off with a skyscraper. Meanwhile, Castiel was watching the Saviors intently, a look of deep concentration on his bruised face.

"Couldn't get him out of here, huh?" Carl murmured to her. He was highly conscious of the fact that they weren't alone.

Claire huffed. "It's like arguing with a toddler."

Castiel briefly pulled his gaze away from the Saviors to squint down at Claire in disapproval.

"They're all just standing around," Enid pointed out, eyebrows knitted. She had both hands wrapped around one of Castiel's, flanking his side. "I don't see any Hunters with them, do you?"

A sense of unease crept over Carl as he scanned for familiar faces. None of them were, and he didn't notice any Hunters, either. At least, none that he might have recognized from their last encounter. *Would* the Hunters join up with the Saviors? That certainly fell under a 'worst-case' type scenario.

No, Carl decided, these Saviors weren't here for Castiel. They wouldn't look this comfortable, lighting their cigarettes and chatting among themselves, completely at ease despite all the hostile stares. No one was fingering any triggers. If they were truly here to square off with an *angel*, they would at least have the courtesy to look *nervous* about it.

Even so, there was something off with these people, that much he could tell. They didn't look like they were gearing up for a fight – more like they'd just gotten *out* of one. At least half of them were visibly injured.

Under all the guns and the bluster and the threat of impending violence, the Saviors looked exhausted. Rick saw it too, Carl could tell.

"Hunters?" Father Gabriel inquired curiously, overhearing them.

Carl shifted on his feet. "Just some group we crossed with; the Saviors caught up to them," he explained without actually revealing anything.

"Ah." Gabriel nodded. It didn't escape Carl's attention that while everybody was watching the Saviors, the priest seemed to be studying *them* instead.

Carl's mouth pursed, hyper-aware of every pair of eyes and ears in their radius. Other residents were moving closer, seeking the safety of a crowd. This made things… complicated. Not only were Carl and his friends hiding certain facts from Castiel (for his own

good, supposedly), but they were also concealing certain *other* facts from the rest of Alexandria (definitely for their own good). The double subterfuge was, frankly, exhausting.

“Enid!” Castiel snapped out unexpectedly, his voice a ragged mess, “Will you *please* stop praying? It is incredibly distracting.”

The girl smiled innocently and squeezed Castiel’s hand. “Oh, I was loud? Sorry, Cas – next time I’ll whisper.”

Gabriel, thankful, misread the situation. “Don’t be afraid, this will all be over soon. Rick knows what he’s doing.” He smiled warmly. “The Lord has gifted us with a generous bounty today, such as we can spare."

“What about tomorrow?” Castiel asked.

“I’m sorry?”

“When you've exhausted your resources, what will you do then?”

Gabriel’s smile wavered, but only for a moment. “What we must.”

It seemed like the wrong thing to say. Castiel's expression turned dark. He took a step forward, as if to confront the Saviors. And yet despite the girls pulling at his arms, it was Gabriel who halted him.

“We must all thread carefully,” Gabriel stated firmly, steel in his voice. “’*A prudent man foreseeth the evil, and hideth himself. But the simple pass on, and are punished*’.”

Head tilted, Castiel stared at the priest.

Gabriel continued, “As a community, we are duty-bound to one another, and we are each other’s keepers. No matter which action you choose, the consequences will be shared, not shouldered alone.” His hand reached underneath his jacket, flashing a red knife handle. It was as much of a warming as it was a threat. “You don’t strike me as a foolish man, Castiel. I’d hate to be proven wrong.”

The teenagers collectively braced themselves, ready to intervene. But, miraculously, Castiel seemed to heed the priest’s warning. “I understand,” he rasped, nodding.

The tension in Gabriel’s shoulders eased. He smiled thinly. “Thank you.”

Someday, Carl thought, the priest was going to have a meltdown when he realizes that he'd just threatened to *shiv* an Angel of the Lord.

At least Claire seemed happy. Castiel continued observing the Saviors.

And Carl… felt a touch of disappointment. Yes, he knew that Castiel was injured, and it wasn’t fair to ask him to fight their battles for them. At the same time, the Saviors’ presence here… it was humiliating.

“I did not miss this shitshow one bit,” somebody whispered behind them, to a murmur of agreement from the other town residents.

“We always knew they'd be back,” came another voice. Carl turned to see Raquel, a woman who'd been in Alexandria since the outbreak, her knowing gaze fixed on the scene.

“Are there usually so many of them?” Carl wondered aloud.

Raquel hummed, her keen eyes scanning the packed street. “It’s hard to say what's usual these days,” she replied, her response more of an observation than a direct answer.

A sudden jab to the ribs caught Carl off guard. He shot Enid a look, silently questioning her with a look: '*What was that for?*'

“Tell you later,” Enid murmured close to Carl's ear.

“Rick, hello, hello!” called an unfamiliar man, coming down the street in an easy jog. He wore a jovial grin, carrying himself with the swagger of a leader.

"Is this the one they call Negan?” Castiel asked, eyeing the newcomer with a heavy frown.

“Negan doesn’t come around for tributes, hon,” said Raquel, leaning a breath closer. She had a disconcerting talent for speaking while barely moving her mouth. “That one over there–” she indicated with her gaze– “is *Simon*. I almost didn't recognize him without the mustache.”

Carl frowned. He'd heard the name Simon before. Wasn’t he Negan’s second-in-command, the one who’d disappeared? It seemed he had found his way back to the hornet’s nest after all.

Raquel then added with a sigh, a touch wistful, “I hate to say it, but these things go a lot smoother when Dwight is in charge.”

“Dwight’s dead,” Carl said coldly, recalling the scarred man who’d stolen Daryl’s crossbow, the one whose head Jake had bashed in.

“Shame.” Raquel clicked her tongue. “At least *he* didn't like to play with his food.”

Castiel turned to her, puzzled. “How is that relevant?”

“It’s a metaphor, dumb-dumb,” Claire sighed.

She was calmer now that they knew the Savior hadn’t come for the still recovering Castiel with angel-killing guns ablazing. The question remained, however – what had happened to all the Hunters they’d captured?

The Saviors parted to let Simon through. The man planted his feet in front of Rick and Michonne, greeting the two of them with a beaming grin, like a shark zeroing in for the kill. “And so, we meet again!” Simon declared with gusto.

Rick didn’t return the man’s smile, but inclined his head in greeting. “You’re late.”

The smile flickered off of Simon's face, like a lightswitch turned off. He heaved a deep sigh. "Listen, Rick, I want to make something abundantly clear: I take full responsibility for our recent… *shortcomings*. Yeah, yeah, don't look so surprised – I mean that. Sincerely."

He turned to address the crowd, Saviors and Alexandrians alike. "Listen up, people! This here partnership of ours, it's a contract written in blood. You folks handle your end, we have ours. That means arriving on schedule, and I'm ashamed to say it's where my boys and I, well, we've been slacking. That's simply unacceptable."

He let his words sink in before abruptly clapping his hands, his mouth stretching in a wide, disconcerting grin. "Moving forward, fresh slate. Whichever one of us breaks the contract, *answers to me*. Are we all clear?"'

He held a hand to his ear, expectantly. There was a murmur of "Yes, Simon," from Saviors and Alexandrians alike.

"Wunderbar," Simon intoned. "That's German for '*get your ass moving, people'*!" he barked, making a rolling gesture with his hand.

Chaos swept over Alexandria. The Saviors ignored the neatly stacked supplies set aside for them. Instead, they poured into the storeroom and surrounding houses, their cruel laughter piercing the air. They went seeking not to scavenge, but to destroy.

To Carl's utmost disappointment and horror, his father stood there and let it all happen. Michonne stood beside him, holding his hand tightly, but her face was a barely-contained mask of fury.

"We kept our end," she told Simon, her voice so low that Carl could only discern her words by watching the movement of her lips.

"Sorry." Simon shrugged, his smile thin and almost apologetic. "The guys needed to let out some steam. But don't worry, they're under strict instructions: property damage only."

"I see," Michonne said icily.

"Anybody giving you trouble lately?" Rick wondered aloud, subtly placing himself between the two. He pointed to the bridge of his nose. Indeed, there was a nasty scabbed cut across Simon's jaw along with fading discoloration underneath his eyes.

"You should see the other guy," Simon returned jokingly, although it was clear Rick had struck a nerve.

"Mmm." Rick nodded, lightly scratching at his short beard. "Is this why your men are terrorizing my people?" he cast a sidelong glance at the ravaging Saviors, no doubt tallying every soiled bandage and telltale limp. The Saviors had taken a beating recently, that much was clear.

Simon let out a chuckle. "What, this?" He spread his arms out.

Behind him, his men callously lined up vases stolen from the Millers' home for an improvised game of bowling. The widower Mr. Miller watched from the sidewalk, his expression frozen in grief. Several townsfolk attempted to pull the old man away, but to no avail.

Hand held out, Rick attempted to reason with the man, “Negan said we’ll be fine as long as we follow your rules. And we *have.* All these people, they worked hard for you. They don’t deserve this.”

Simon rolled his eyes and heaved a loud sigh. “Rick, Rick, Lighten up, will you?” He leaned in, meeting Rick’s gaze from an uncomfortably close distance. “It’s just a bit of o’ fashioned tomfoolery. ‘Boys being boys’ and all of that, except these days I’m all about inclusivity, and you know, some of my best men are ladies. Like I said – property damage *only*. It’s just stuff. Stuff can be replaced. So ease up! The kids gotta let loose sometimes, break stuff, have fun! You should try it.”

Leaning back with a smirk, he added, “Speaking of kids – I heard our guys found yours.” He made a show of looking around, searchingly, until his snakelike gaze landed on Carl.

“Playing with his food,” Raquel whispered behind Carl, which seemed to mean ‘be careful’.

Carl met Simon’s gaze with a glare.

That only seemed to amuse him. “Well, I’ll be damned,” he chuckled and knocked his shoulder into Michonne’s. “He’s got your scowl, darling.”

A moment later, the Savior was standing in front of Carl, his long legs covering the short distance in a blink. From up close, his smirk was nothing short of predatory. “You must be Carl.”

Carl stared back at him dismissively. “Okay.”

The chuckle that left Simon’s mouth wasn't especially friendly. He flicked Carl’s hat and said, “I see why the boss likes you.”

He then looked back to where Rick and Michonne were practically hovering over his shoulder. “You know, Rick, I’ve never had kids of my own—at least, none that I know of,” he said, his tone cold and mocking. “Can’t imagine what it's been like for you, trying to raise a couple of whippersnappers in all of this. Seems to me, you've got a lot to lose.”

“Simon–” Rick began.

But Simon decided to ignore him. Instead, he turned back to Carl. “Young man, what’s it feel like to be a burden?”

He raised his hand to flick Carl’s hat again, but then Castiel spoke up, “Don’t do that.”

“Or what, buddy?” Simon gave a little snicker as he looked Castiel over, completely oblivious to the danger staring him in the face. “You’ll bleed on me?”

“I don’t think that’s necessary,” Father Gabriel interjected, holding out his hands in a calming gesture. “None of us want any violence today.”

His words rang hollow as the Saviors continued to wreck the settlement all around them, reigning chaos just for the hell of it. A window shattered nearby. Carl had never missed his gun more.

“No, we don’t,” said Simon with a chuckle, glancing back at Rick pointedly. Then he turned his attention to the priest. “Believe it or not, I’m actually here to see you, Father.”

“Me?” Gabriel asked, surprised.

“It’s Gary, right?” Simon asked, pointing at the priest.

“Gabriel.”

Simon sucked a breath through his teeth. “Close enough.” He leaned in, looking Gabriel up and down. “Are you the real deal? I mean this whole getup, it's not some kind of fetish thing, is it?”

Gabriel smiled thinly. “Not to me.”

Eyes narrowed, Simon stared into the priest’s eyes, as if trying to call Gabriel’s bluff. Gabriel's throat moved, but he looked back coolly, meeting the Savior’s gaze steadily. It was remarkable how far the man had come, he who had once curled up in fear at the first sign of violence.

Finally, Simon gave a little shrug. “That works. The boss oughta be happy.”

Surprise flashed across Gabriel’s face. He cleared his throat. “My church is always open to anyone seeking spiritual guidance.”

Simon smirked and clapped Gabriel’s shoulder. “Much appreciated, Father.”

It was an odd exchange. Somehow, Carl doubted that Negan was looking for spiritual advice. Was this another one of Simon’s games? If so, where was he going with this?

Smiling brightly, Simon announced, “Now, how about we get this show started?” He rubbed his hands together. “Where do you good folks keep your shovels?”

“Shovels?” Gabriel asked faintly.

Eyes flashing dangerously, Simon brought his fingers to his lips and whistled. Instantly, the Saviors ceased their attempts to destroy Alexandria. One by one, they gathered behind Simon, awaiting his command. A heavy silence filled the air.

“Shovels,” Simon repeated. He was no longer smiling.

Gabriel looked to Rick for guidance.

This was another one of Simon's games, no doubt. Rick surveyed their audience, these Saviors who had just moments before torn through their belongings for no apparent reason, who stared back at him hard, every one of them armed and ready. "We keep a few in the shed," Rick offered finally, his voice dry, "near the cemetery."

"Let's take a walk," Simon announced with a face-splitting grin.

Chapter End Notes

Hello x

A Graveyard Smash

Chapter Notes

> As requested, PREVIOUSLY: Simon has a Winchester encounter. One of Cas' kids is captured by the Saviors. Daryl escapes, meets Dean. Sam is currently unaccounted for. Castiel is recovering in Alexandria. Author continues to confuse everyone by updating a hideously plotty story approximately once a year (sorry!)
>
> Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Although it was only a short trek through the settlement, Castiel was breathing raggedly by the time they reached the cemetery. The angel slumped against the wall, his face drawn with exertion, blood trickling from one of his eye ducts.

Wincing in sympathy, Carl pulled a few squares of gauze from his back pocket, always keeping some around for the exact same reason. Claire snatched it from his hand.

“It’s like you’re trying to piss me off,” she fretted at Castiel, pushing the gauze into his face.

Sighing, Enid nodded in agreement. “You have to let yourself heal, Cas.”

“This will pass,” Castiel rasped, taking the gauze and pressing it to his eye. True to his word, he seemed to be breathing easier.

Her answering huff said she wasn't buying it. Carl refrained from reminding her how, just a few weeks prior, he himself had been elbow-deep in Castiel’s guts, wrestling his innards back into place. A little bleeding eyeball was nothing in the grand scheme of things, right? Carl would know.

Alexandria's cemetery lay in an out-of-sight corner at the far end of the settlement, nestled between the walls and the last house on the block. A makeshift collection of planks marked the resting place of those fortunate enough to receive a burial.

They’d been planning an expansion of the walls here, Carl recalled. With so many people squeezed inside the narrow space now, it felt like a bad omen.

While nearly everyone in the community had gathered within the narrow confines of the cemetery, the Saviors had torn through the little shed in the back. They’d taken out the shovels and were laying them out on the ground, looking oddly somber about it.

The only one who looked genuinely pleased to be there was Simon. He strolled around the cemetery, thumbs hooked into his belt, scuffing his feet over compressed dirt and reading the

names on every carefully etched plank out loud.

“I have to say, I’m impressed,” Simon remarked with a nod, his lips subtly pursed in approval as he surveyed the cemetery grounds. “Everything’s so… symmetrical. It’s almost enough to make an OCD ghost feel right at home, eh, Padre?” He winked at Gabriel.

The priest’s lips formed a tight smile as he regarded Simon, his gaze betraying a hint of unease. “I’m glad you appreciate the effort,” he said softly. “It’s important we show our departed the respect they are owed. They remind us of everything we've lost and sacrificed along the way. Keeping their memory alive is as much of a privilege as it is our duty.”

Simon responded with a light chuckle. “Wow, that’s a lot of hokey.” He casually adjusted his belt as he turned his attention to Rick, who had been watching him like a hawk. “What are you waiting for, a written invitation?” He sneered, gesturing toward the shovels. “Time to get to work, assholes.”

No one moved. A murmur rippled through the crowd, the tension palpable as each member of their community grappled with their own sense of helplessness. They looked to Rick for guidance. Surrounded by an army of predators, what else could they do?

Carl's mind raced with a multitude of terrible possibilities. Was Simon going to force them to dig their own graves? He didn't put it past the man.

Glancing at Castiel, Carl found some reassurance. So far, the angel had kept his word to Gabriel, staying out of... whatever the hell this was. But even though he was hurting, Carl didn’t doubt that Castiel would jump to protect them if it came to that.

The terrified resignation on his neighbors’ faces made Carl want to shout about it from the rooftops. That wouldn’t be fair to Castiel, but man… it sure felt good, picturing Simon with his eyes burnt out of his skull.

With that satisfying image in his mind’s eye, Carl stood a little taller. Today, tomorrow, a month from now, it didn’t matter. The Saviors would get what was coming to them.

“Well?” Simon demanded, his voice sharp and impatient.

Standing under the watchful eye of the community he’d sworn to protect, Rick’s shoulders sagged. “No one has to die today,” he said softly.

Simon’s eyebrows popped up. “They might,” he threatened, moving until he was practically breathing in Rick’s face, “if you make me ask again.”

More than anything, Carl wanted this game to be over. *Grab his gun,* his mind whispered.

Jaw clenched, Rick reached for the shovel with the yellow handle, the one no one ever really used because it was so heavy. Certainly heavy enough to crack a few skulls, if ever the need arose. Keeping his gaze lowered, Rick did his best to keep his anger to himself.

Simon seemed pleased. “Back her up, boys!” he yelled out suddenly.

A steady beeping drew everyone's attention to the street. The Saviors reversed a heavy box truck right up to the cemetery's entrance. The sticker on the backdoors had the words "Arctic Haul" printed in bold letters next to a faded illustration of a polar bear.

The realization dawned on Carl like a smack in the face. "Daryl?" he whispered.

Simon heard him and gave a little snort in response. "What, that guy? Pfff." He shook his head, chuckling. "You really think we'd come all this way to throw *Daryl* a damn funeral?"

Rick's shoulders relaxed incrementally.

The smirk on Simon's face broadened. "Nah, we cut that asshole loose weeks ago. You see, your boy Daryl went and got himself bitten. Cross my heart, he walked right into that ugly little thing's mouth. What a shame," he said with a sneer, punctuating his words with a mocking click of his tongue. "Some people can't take a hard day's work."

"You're a liar," Carl burst out. He pressed forward, only to be stopped by Michonne's strong arms weaving tightly around him, grounding him in place.

"Don't," she whispered in warning, a hitch in her breath.

Simon was relishing every moment of this. "Afraid not, sonny." He turned to Gabriel, grinning at his horrified expression. "You know what, Padre? Next time you find a herd, keep your eyes open. Who knows? Maybe you'll get to see Daryl again. If you do, feel free to–" he imitated a gun going off– "give him his last rites."

Lowering his gaze, Gabriel responded by uttering a silent prayer under his breath.

All around them, the crowd grew restless, the air thick with shared anxiety. Rick stood among them in silence, his knuckles turning white around the shovel's yellow handle. His pale eyes stared blankly into space.

Carl's heart stilled. He knew that look.

All it would take is one swing. Just a quick swing. It wouldn't take much to wipe the smirk from Simon's face, permanently.

But then what?

Simon liked to play games. He was practically baiting Rick to attack. The entirety of his crew was watching, waiting in the wings with their weapons at the ready. Winning this fight would take some kind of a miracle.

They *had* a miracle.

He just wasn't up to it right now.

"I got him," Carl told Michonne, shaking himself free. He then picked up the shovel she'd dropped and stuck it in the ground, hoping the sound would help draw Rick out of the fugue state he'd slipped into. "Dad," he said sternly.

Rick shuddered as he pulled himself back from the edge. His eyes still carried a wild glaze as he looked over at his son.

“Let’s just get this over with,” Carl told him, gripping the shovel to keep his hands from shaking. It might not be Daryl, but the Saviors had brought someone. There would be time to mourn later, away from Simon’s gleeful eyes.

Mouth trembling, Rick nodded. He turned back to Simon and said, his voice dripping with disgust, “Thank you for telling us.”

Simon had the gall to look disappointed. Grimacing, he dragged a hand over his shaved skull. “Go on,” he grumbled at his men, “show ‘em what’s hiding behind curtain number one.”

Stomach rolling, Carl watched alongside everyone else as the Saviors went on to unload the truck. They knew that the Saviors wouldn’t bring a refrigerated truck all the way out here for no reason, wouldn’t drag them all to the cemetery, wouldn’t thrust shovels into their hands. Not without a reason.

But if not Daryl, then whose body was in the truck? A lot of people had vanished by the time Carl had found his way back home: Maggie, Carol, Tara, Rosita, Sasha, even Morgan was –

Carl stared.

The truck was empty.

Rick let out a stuttered exhale. “You said–”

“Maybe I wasn’t being very clear,” Simon interrupted. “We’re not here to *bury* anyone today.” He paused for emphasis, scanning the faces around him. Then slowly, very slowly, he raised both hands, palms open and facing upwards, as if lifting an invisible weight. “Get it?”

What?

Rick stared at Simon without comprehending.

“You’re serious,” Michonne said, bewildered. Her lips twitched slightly, a reflexive reaction, as if her mind were trying to convince her it was just a bad joke.

Simon let out a long, airy sigh. “Serious as a clown in a library,” he replied.

For several long moments, no one moved. This was clearly another one of Simon’s twisted mind games. The idea of excavating their loved ones from their own graves seemed beyond cruel, even for the Saviors. Surely, this was just another test.

“What would a clown be doing in a library?” Castiel’s perplexed voice cut through the tense silence.

Simon snapped his fingers in Castiel’s direction. “That guy gets it,” he quipped. And then, without warning, his mood changed. “I want half.”

Breath catching in his throat, Rick's gaze flitted around the cemetery grounds, his mouth moving as if he were counting every plank. “Half,” he repeated, weariness evident in his voice.

Simon surged forward, bringing their faces inches apart. “Did I stutter?” he snarled, spittle flying from his mouth. His cheeks flushed crimson with rage. “You think this is a joke? Let me break it down for you, asshole: I want *half* these damn graves turned over, whether it's your little sister, your auntie, or your goddamn poodle down there. You fucking dig, you use your fingernails if you have to, or I will tear this place apart piece by piece and take my pound of flesh from the ground *up*."

The ensuing silence was deafening.

Simon’s teeth were bared. “What’s it going to be, Rick? Up or down?”

“For God’s sake, Rick!” Spencer burst across the cemetery and seized a shovel, plunging it into the ground with determined force.

A thin, keening sound pierced the air. Carl’s face snapped to find Barbara standing in the window, watching everything from the upper floor. Her mouth was open in horror, letting out that awful sound.

Oh, Carl thought dumbly, *so that’s where she went*.

There was a sudden commotion as some of Alexandria’s residents rushed to stop Spencer, while others moved to defend him. However, it barely lasted. Moments later, Spencer’s hands faltered. Gagging, he threw his head aside and heaved. The shovel had barely scratched the surface.

“Hey Simon, this one’s worth at least two bodies,” joked one of the Saviors. He sidled up to Olivia and wrapped a meaty arm around her neck. She whimpered, eyes wide with terror.

“Let her go,” Carl demanded, his hand inching towards his knife.

The Savior sneered, but then Castiel intervened. “Release her,” the angel rasped, his glare fixed on the Savior. “Now.”

“Stay out of it,” Claire whispered furiously, tugging Castiel back by his torn coat.

The Savior recoiled, his expression a mixture of confusion and fear. He stumbled, shoving past his own crew in his haste to get away. Everyone stared between him and Castiel, taken aback by the strange turn of events.

“Up or down?” Simon growled, his face mere inches from Rick’s. He seemed oblivious to anything else happening around him.

The scent of cold sweat hung heavy in the air, suffocating and cloying. The Saviors shifted restlessly, anticipating violence. Weapons were unholstered, metallic clinks anything but subtle. A few of them looked apprehensive, casting wary glances, while others licked their lips, tasting blood in the air.

Upstairs, Barbara wailed.

Face downcast in sorrow, Rick turned away from Simon and dropped the shovel into the nearest mound.

“Dad,” Carl whispered, so low he didn’t think anyone had heard him.

“Wait,” Spencer gasped out, lifting his head with his hand outstretched. “Not… not that one.”

Rick paused, standing over Reg Monroe’s grave with his grip tight around the yellow handle. He surveyed the horrified faces, trying to decide which of their loved ones he would unearth for the Saviors’ sick pleasure. He lifted his face to the sky and exhaled. “Why do this?” he asked, voice low and scratchy.

Simon's eyes flashed with rage. “Too late.” He drew his handgun and racked it, then pointed it at Michonne’s head. Her shoulders hitched.

“No, wait, wait…!” Rick threw out his hand, his voice breaking with desperation.

The world turned upside down. Blood rushing in his ears, Carl’s mouth moved before he could stop himself: “*Cas, DO something!*” he shouted.

Eyes narrowed, Castiel stomped forward on heavy feet.

“Don’t you dare, Cas,” Claire hissed, wrapping both hands around Castiel’s wrist.

It occurred to Carl then that she was blocking Castiel from conjuring his blade into his hand. There was no familiar whisper of metal, no trace of otherworldly gleam.

The angel frowned at her, frustration slipping into his bloodshot gaze. Her grip was tight around his wrist, nails digging into his skin. He could have shrugged her off easily, but he didn’t. Castiel always let Claire have her way.

Simon seemed to find the whole thing hilarious. “No, by all means, *Cas*,” he taunted, sidling up to Castiel with a mocking grin. “Dare.”

Castiel’s face tilted, frowning. Flecks of dried blood dotted the hollow beneath his eye.

It was hard to define what it was about Castiel that put some people on edge. On the surface, he was just a guy. A bit odd, for sure, but just some guy. And yet something about him made people react in unexpected ways, even though they couldn’t understand why.

From the way Simon’s smirk dimmed, it was clear he wasn’t immune to the Castiel effect. It was fleeting, but noticeable. When Castiel didn’t react, Simon almost seemed relieved.

Maybe Carl was just imagining things.

With his lips curling into a sneer, Simon lowered his face to Claire’s level. “Didn’t think so.”

Abruptly, Simon spun on his heels. “Right-o, where was I?” Humming, he scratched his bald head, surveying his audience. “Oh, that’s right. Consequences.” He smirked and raised his gun.

Using the hand that wasn't constrained by Claire's tight grip, Castiel lifted and pressed two fingers to the back of Simon's shiny bald head.

The reaction was immediate. Simon spun around with an undignified yelp, turning his weapon on Castiel. As did at least a dozen Saviors, guns drawn to defend their so-called leader.

Pushing Claire firmly behind him, Castiel held up his hand to show it was empty. He had a look of smug satisfaction about him, like the one time he’d actually beaten them in a game of Trivia Pursuit.

Of course, Simon was as baffled as he was livid. “*What… the fuck*?”

Castiel paused. “There was a bee?” he offered unconvincingly.

For once, Simon was rendered speechless. It didn’t stop him from raising his gun an inch higher, his finger brushing over the trigger. Carl held his breath, but before Simon could make up his mind, the driver of the refrigerated truck climbed out, diverting his attention.

“It’s him again,” said the driver, a pudgy man in khakis and a bucket hat that reminded Carl a little of Dale. He presented Simon with a handheld radio.

Simon scoffed. “Now?”

“He says it’s important.” Not-Dale shrugged.

With the gun still trained on Castiel, Simon raised his face to the heavens and heaved a long, aggravated sigh. When he rolled his eyes, he did it with his whole body.

Then he snatched the radio, mouthed ‘Sorry’ to everyone watching, and squeezed the Talk button. “Ye-ello.”

The line crackled to life with a burst of static. “*Is this Simon?*”

“Speaking.”

“*Thank goodness!*” the voice said furiously, the static doing little to disguise its frustration. “*I’ve been waiting an eternity to speak with you–*” the connection crackled– “*don’t mean to tell you how to run your crew, but really, as a fellow leader–*”

Simon’s eyebrows popped up. Judging from the static, the man wasn't close by, yet somehow he managed to sense that he’d just misspoken.

“*Ah, not that, erm, what I mean is–*” he stammered– “*I do admire your leadership skills.*”

“Kind of busy here,” Simon said with an air of faux-friendliness. The plastic creaked in his grip. “What’s pulling your wedgie this time, Gregory?”

Carl pressed his mouth closed, repressing a gasp. He couldn’t show that the name meant anything to him. Was this the Hilltop’s Gregory? It might not have been, it wasn’t like it was an unusual name. He snuck a glance at his dad, looking for a sign of recognition.

Anyone who didn’t know Rick might’ve missed it, but Carl would've recognized that shifty look anywhere.

Gregory cleared his throat into the static. “*I assure you this isn't like last time*,” he simpered. “*It's– it’s one of those people you told me about.*”

Simon’s entire demeanor shifted. He lowered his weapon, tuning in entirely to the conversation at hand. “Oh?” he purred.

Static crackled on and off as Gregory ranted “*–waltzed right in like he owns the place. Of course, from your excellent description, I recognized him immediately. Tall feller–*” his voice distorted– “*all this talk of insurgency and insubordination, you know I won't stand for that–*” a wave of static – “*inform you straight away!*”

The radio creaked, plastic straining in Simon’s hand. “You do not let him leave, Gregory. That little shitface is mine, you hear me?”

“*Ah, yes, yes, of course, you can count on–*” static crackled– “*rush you or anything, but, ah, time is of the essence here. I’m, uh, stalling him the best I can, but–*”

Simon muted the radio. “Change of plans,” he announced brightly. “We’re taking a little detour. Rick, buddy, see this gets done by the time we’re back–” he made a vague gesture at the cemetery grounds. “Everybody else: with me.”

Most of the Saviors obeyed without hesitation, except for one bald man with arms like tree trunks who sheepishly raised his hand.

Simon pinched the bridge of his nose. “Yes, Leroy?”

Leroy cupped a giant hand over his mouth. “What about the priest?” he whispered loudly enough for everyone in the cemetery to hear. “Negan said–”

“I know what Negan said,” Simon growled in annoyance. He rolled his eyes before snapping his fingers at Gabriel, who instinctively took a step back. “We’re borrowing the priest,” he announced.

Gabriel blinked. “Pardon?”

Shaking his head, Rick protested, “Wait, what are you–”

“Shhhhhh.” Simon pinched the air with his fingers, ending with a theatrical zipping motion. “Shh. I don’t want to hear it. Do you happen to have a Rabbi on hand? A Voodoo Shaman, perhaps? No? Then this one will do. Negan wants to talk to him.” He rolled his eyes, adding,

“And don’t ask me why, because I really don’t care. What’s between a man and his God is his own goddamn business.”

“It’s okay,” said Gabriel, although his expression said it was anything but. “If it's counsel Negan seeks, I’ll be more than–”

“Great!” Simon interrupted, snapping his fingers. “Dex–” he called out to one of the bikers– “Take Father Whatever-His-Name-Was to see the boss. Everyone else: *MOVE!*”

No one spoke as the Saviors loaded Gabriel onto a motorcycle, not allowing him to take anything with him. The priest tried to remain calm, even managing a smile to reassure the community members, some of whom were openly weeping at his departure.

And just like that, the Saviors were gone. Only the feeling of violation remained.

“There was *a bee*?” Rick demanded furiously, turning on Castiel.

Castiel didn’t respond. His face was turned away, a frown playing on his brow. It was as if he was listening to something none of them could hear. Chances were, he was.

“Dad, the Saviors are heading for the Hilltop,” Carl stated firmly, partly to draw Rick’s attention away from Castiel. “Aren’t we going after them?”

Enid spoke up quietly, addressing Rick, “We have to warn Maggie.”

“She isn’t there,” Rick replied curtly, his glare still fixed on Castiel.

“What?” Enid asked, eyes round. “Where is she?”

But Rick’s attention was elsewhere. “Why don’t you ask your friend?” As Castiel turned to walk away, Rick seized him by the shoulder. “Hey, I’m talking to you.”

“Back off, asshole,” Claire snarled, her blonde hair flying as she quickly shoved herself between them.

Backing away, Rick rubbed his shoulder in surprise. Claire didn’t look it, but she packed one hell of a punch. “Do you make a habit of using teenagers as bodyguards, Castiel?” he asked dryly.

Frowning at Claire in disapproval, Castiel replied, “As it happens, they leave me little choice.”

Rick scoffed before asking, head tilted, “How are you involved with the Saviors?”

Castiel frowned in confusion. The crowd murmured, a sea of bleak expressions and whispers of uncertainty.

“That man knew you,” Olivia spoke up, her voice barely more than a whisper. Her face was blotchy and red. “He just looked at you and he ran. He knew you, Castiel.” She rubbed at her neck.

Castiel shook his head and sighed. “No, Olivia. He was just weak.”

“You think we’re stupid?” Rick demanded. “‘*Cas, do something*’?” he repeated, eyebrows raised and lip curled back. “What exactly did my son – *my son* – think you might do?”

Carl felt himself flush. “Dad–”

Rick held up his hand. “I’ve been lenient. My boy, he vouched for you, which is the only reason I’m not stabbing you in the face right now–”

“Dad, are you serious?” Carl demanded angrily.

“– So I’m giving you one last chance, man to man, to come clean.” Rick took a threatening step forward and asked through gritted teeth, “Just who the hell are you, Castiel?”

Exasperated, Castiel glanced at the teenagers. Claire shook her head furiously, mouth set in a thin line.

That only made Rick angrier. He snarled, “No, you don’t look at them, *you answer me*.”

“I could just let him stab me in the face,” Castiel suggested to Claire with a sigh of frustration.

“No!” Claire yelled at him.

“Is this some kind of game to you?” Michonne wondered, her voice a careful blend of restraint and anger. Like everyone else, she’d been watching the exchange with growing unease and suspicion. “We brought you into our home, don’t we deserve the truth?”

Her gaze turned to Carl. He looked away.

“Your friend is alive,” Castiel decided to offer a different truth instead, almost as a gesture of peace. The unexpected response hit Carl like a punch in the stomach

“What?” Rick whispered, caught off guard. “What did you say?”

“Simon lied to you, your friend isn’t dead,” Castiel stated matter-of-factly, nodding. A look of puzzlement crossed his features as he frowned, adding, “He also lied about going to the restroom earlier.”

“How could you possibly know that?” Rick demanded suspiciously, his eyes narrowing.

“Well, he’s severely constipated.”

“About Daryl, jackass!” Rick snapped.

“Oh.” Castiel’s expression fell. “Intuition?”

Behind him, Enid’s palm met her forehead.

The vein in Rick's forehead strained against his skin. "Jesus took one look at you and ran for the hills. Was he 'weak' too?" He took a step forward, murder in his gaze. "Am I?" His voice was a dangerous whisper. "You think you know who you're dealing with here? Do you have *any idea* what I can do?"

Castiel watched him with a frown, head tilted. "I know who you are, Rick Grimes," he said honestly. "Your children think the world of you."

Anyone familiar with Castiel would have recognized the sincerity in his tone. Rick, however, didn't know him at all. To him, it was a thinly veiled threat, using his children as leverage.

With his teeth bared in a snarl, Rick advanced on Castiel, hatchet in his hand.

Carl rushed into the space between them. "Dad, stop!"

For a brief moment, everyone was still. The silence was deafening. It was only when Carl followed his father's devastated gaze did he realize that his hand was on his sheathed knife. Swallowing hard, Carl dropped his hand. A wave of guilt washed over him.

"Just… go back to the infirmary, Cas," he said, not looking up.

Castiel nodded quietly, mouth turned down in sympathy. The girls jumped on the opportunity to drag him away, supporting his weight as he slowly limped away.

"Bruce, Francine," Rick called, his sharp gaze following Castiel's retreating form. "Watch the infirmary. Make sure he doesn't leave."

Carl scowled and turned to follow after them, but Rick's grip on his arm stopped him. "No," Rick said sternly. He pushed one of the shovels into his chest. "You're helping."

Carl gaped at him. "Are you crazy?"

Rick turned to his distraught community members. "I know this seems insane," he told them, voice rising with authority. "But this is an insane world. You heard Simon; they'll be back for their half." He spread his hand toward the line of graves, eliciting gasps of horror and covered faces.

Rick continued, shaking his head, "No, we move our people where they can't be found. The Saviors want bodies; there's plenty behind the walls." He scoffed. "They won't know the difference."

Carl's back and shoulders ached by the time they finished, well past sundown. Although his father called out his name, Carl ignored him as he stomped past the front door of their house. Despite the strong temptation, he stopped himself from slamming the door in Rick's face.

Carl knew he was acting like an angst-riddled teenager, but he'd just finished desecrating a graveyard on his father's orders. He felt like he was entitled.

Apparently, Rick disagreed. "We have to talk."

Carl scowled. "I need a shower."

Rick stood in Carl's path, blocking the stairs. "It can wait," he said sternly, studying his son's face. His expression softened. "Carl, you were about to pull a knife on me. On *me*. For what, that man?"

The mix of hurt and anger in Rick's voice was clear, but Carl refused to feel guilty. Not yet. He needed his anger to shield him. "You should've told me about Maggie," he said, desperate to change the subject. "Where is she?"

Disbelief entered Rick's voice. "You want to talk to me about keeping secrets?"

"That's–" Carl cut himself off, glaring. "Know what? Fine, don't tell me." He slipped under his father's arm and made for the stairs. "I'm gonna take a shower. We can talk when I don't smell like something bit me." He stomped up the stairs in a huff.

"Don't you climb down the window!" Rick shouted after him.

Carl yelled back, "I'm not gonna go out the window. *Jesus*, Dad."

He went out the upstairs window.

As he snuck past the living room window, he crouched down, catching snippets of Rick and Michonne's quiet conversation. He nearly startled when he spotted Eugene at their front door, hand raised to knock. Fortunately, Eugene didn't notice him, allowing him to slip away undetected.

He thought he would need to pass the guards to get into the infirmary, but he didn't expect to find Bruce and Francine sprawled on their backs, knocked out. Carl hurried to check on them but was startled when Francine gave a rather impressive, drawn out snore.

Okay, then.

The infirmary was quiet. In recent weeks, he and his friends had essentially taken over the place. With their doctor dead and the Saviors having stolen all their meds – the whole thing about taking only half was such *bullshit* – the infirmary had been just another house, no different than any other on the block.

With Tara and Denise gone, Claire had moved into the upstairs bedroom, while Castiel mostly inhabited the floor below. Occasionally, Olivia would show up with a home-cooked meal, joining the teenagers in harassing Castiel to rest. The fridge had quickly filled up with children's drawing – Oliver was in his stick figure phase, while Judith was more of an abstract artist.

When Carl entered, the homely atmosphere was completely absent. Instead, he found Claire sitting alone on the bottom step of the staircase, cradling her nape with her head held low, sniffing quietly.

“Claire?” he asked softly, approaching with the care one would use around a wounded animal.

“You just missed him,” she murmured.

“Cas left?” Carl wasn’t surprised. What shocked him was that Claire had let him go.

And Claire – laughed.

“We’re so damn stupid,” she said, laughing through her tears. It was a hitching, uncomfortable sound. “He knew, Carl. He knew about Jake, everything.”

“How?” Carl whispered. They’d been so careful.

“He can hear prayers,” she sighed, brushing a knuckle over her eyes. “And Scott’s been praying to him every day.” She laughed sadly. “I’m such an idiot, thinking I could keep him here. He even took one of Oliver’s stupid drawings with him. Like some kind of memento. I don’t – I don’t think he plans on coming back at all.”

Carl shook his head. “No, no, Claire, you were just trying to protect him. He knows that.” He sighed deeply. “I’ll talk to him, okay? Stay here. He can't have gotten far.”

He *couldn’t* have gotten far, not with the way he’d almost collapsed earlier just to make it down the street. Carl took off running anyway.

When Carl reached the gates, he found them still locked shut, but Anna, the guard on duty, was slumped over, snoring peacefully. She stirred slightly when Carl slammed the gate shut behind her. He and Castiel were going to have a serious talk about leaving people knocked out when there were roamers out and about.

It was a good thing that Carl knew where Castiel was headed. He’d seen the angel’s face turn that way earlier, when he was listening to something none of them could hear. Northeast, toward the Saviors’ main compound.

Where Scott had been praying to him all this time.

Under the moonlight, Castiel looked much better than he had that afternoon. He stood taller, not as hunched over. The extra hours of rest had clearly benefited him.

He wasn’t too pleased to see Carl, however. “Carl, go home,” he said sternly.

Breathing hard, Carl shook his head. “Don’t leave,” he pleaded through quickened breaths. “You can’t do that to– to Claire.”

Castiel turned to face him fully. “I have to.”

“Then I’ll come with you.”

“No.” Castiel was shaking his head before Carl even finished his sentence. “You need to stay here. With your family.”

He opened his mouth to argue, but Castiel placed a hand on his shoulder, halting him. “Listen to me, Carl. You did well today, hiding your dead. There’s more to this than meets the eye. Those people took your priest for a reason. They wanted the remains of your people for a reason.”

“Which is…what?” Carl asked, baffled.

Cas sighed. “I don't know yet, but I need to find out before they’re ready.”

“I don’t get it.” Carl shook his head helplessly, bile rising in his throat. “There are corpses around every corner. Why bother with ours?”

“It's different.”

“*How* is it different?” Carl demanded, voice cracking. He’d spent the better part of the day carrying the too-light remains of people long gone, listening to their families weeping as if they were losing them all over again. He needed to know why.

“Before I left, I saw the list of names at your gates,” Castiel began. “More names than the graves in your cemetery. Your people couldn’t bring them all home, but you’ve tried, haven’t you?” His gaze bore into Carl. His eyes were very blue, even in the dark. “You care about your dead, you commemorate them. The ones you have brought to burial inside your walls, and the ones you were forced to leave behind. Throughout history, across the span of cultures, that’s always been the case. Humankind has created thousands upon thousands of practices and rituals meant to honor the dead. That intent, that sense of purpose and faith, it leaves something behind. Something that can be used, do you understand?” He squeezed Carl's shoulder. “They don't care about the bodies, they care that *you* cared for them.”

“The world is full of graveyards,” Carl pointed out quietly.

“That is true.” Castiel nodded. “But how many have not yet been abandoned?”

“That’s really creepy, you know that, right?” Carl asked, causing Castiel to snort in amusement. “I’m coming with you. You really can’t stop me.”

“I really, really can.”

“Cas, come on!” Carl protested, huffing. “Scott’s my friend, too. And besides – you’re hurt!”

“I’ll be fine,” Castiel said firmly, a little exasperated. Then he paused, looking at Carl in contemplation. “In fact, so will you.”

And before Carl could ponder the meaning behind that statement, Castiel pressed two fingers to his forehead. Carl’s breath stuttered as his vision filled with light. A warm glow washed

over his entire body, melting away his every ache, making him feel lighter and strangely serene.

Castiel spun him around and gave him a slight nudge. “Go *home*, Carl.”

Later, standing in front of the mirror in his small en suite bathroom for what felt like an eternity, Carl eventually summoned the courage to peel the bandage from his eye.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for being awesome x

A New Hope

Chapter Notes

PREVIOUSY:

Wings of a butterfly: If you remember, in TWD canon, Enid was the one going around convincing the Hilltoppers to stand up with Maggie. Well, Enid wasn't around to do that this time, so things played out a little differently. Last chapter, we found out that Maggie isn't at the Hilltop anymore. What happened, and what has she been up to? Time to find out!

Enjoy!

A lone figure leaped from the burning inferno of the watchtower. The silence stretched as Maggie Rhee and her companions watched the figure plummet toward the ground. It was a long way down.

The tower was one of two automatic radio-relay stations the Saviors ran to maintain their communication network. Taking it down wouldn't cut the Saviors off completely, but it would limit their long range capabilities to just a few channels, making eavesdropping significantly easier. Maggie knew this was just one small step in their larger plan, but every disruption counted.

Although the watchtower was remote, located far from the nearest outpost, the smoke would be seen far and wide. Sooner or later, someone would come looking. Maggie didn't plan to stick around for long, even if the sight of the flames consuming the tower filled her with grim satisfaction.

"Electric?" Maggie suggested, speaking through the bandana tied around her face. Pregnancy didn't pair well with smoke inhalation.

"Grease buildup," said the man beside her, stroking his white beard thoughtfully. "I warned them about the state of that kitchen."

"Happens all the time." Sasha nodded in agreement, the tall flames reflecting in her eyes. "I was a firefighter before," she offered as an aside.

Maggie turned to the man. "People heard you?"

He smiled. "I made sure of it."

"Congratulations, Frank," Maggie said, inclining her head to the *former* Savior. "You're a free man at last."

“What about this one?” Sasha asked, indicating the *other* watchtower occupant, the one Kal was keeping immobile with a spear to the neck.

They’d grabbed the Savior just before the attack when he’d come down to find out why the tower’s generator had stopped working. He was barely out of his teens, with acne-blotchy skin and round spectacles that hung crooked at the tip of his nose. Maggie’s impending motherhood might’ve given her pause if she hadn’t already heard all about this young man.

“Fucking traitor,” the young man spat, glaring at his former companion with wild, bloodshot eyes. “I should’ve known, Frank! You backstabbing pussy! You cocksucker! Negan will burn you for this! TRAITOR!”

Kal tightened his grip on the spear, pressing it more firmly against the Savior’s neck. Maggie stepped forward, her eyes cold. “You’ve got a big mouth on you, Jeremy,” she said with a raised eyebrow. “That’s right, I know who you are. Frank told me everything.” She leaned forward, whispering, “And I know what you did.”

“You–” Jeremy spluttered, boggling. “No, no, you’re wrong. I was only–” he inhaled sharply. “IT WAS HIM! Frank, he–”

The old man calmly dropped a Polaroid photograph on the ground where Jeremy was kneeling. In it, the young man could be seen smiling broadly, his arm slung around a crucified walker – the animated corpse of a girl who couldn’t have been older than twelve.

A wave of nausea washed over Maggie. She recognized the place – the twisted amusement park where the Saviors had made their gruesome display. She knew there were a dozen more strung-up bodies just out of frame. Her gaze darted back to the photo, the young man’s smile a mockery of innocence.

“I took it from your bedside table,” Frank told the young man, his weathered face etched with sorrow. “I’m sorry they turned you into this.” To Maggie he said, “Do whatever you want with him, just make sure the body burns. This can’t lead back to me.”

“Where will you go?” Maggie wondered.

Frank offered a wry smile and picked up his duffel bag. “I was a Ranger for thirty-odd years; I’ll manage. Better out here than back there, kneeling with the rest of them. Trust me, these old knees won’t miss the strain.”

Watching the old man leave, a part of Maggie wondered if she was doing the right thing by letting him go. Frank had been a valuable ally, but she knew he wasn’t in it for the fight. All he’d ever wanted was a way out.

Jeremy lashed out suddenly, kicking Kal’s foot and dislodging the spear from his neck. He lunged at Maggie, but before he could do anything, the handle of Kal’s spear caught him across the face with a loud crack, spraying crimson mist into the air. He fell back onto his knees, gasping in pain.

Maggie didn't allow herself to flinch. "You'll die here today, Jeremy," she informed the young Savior, giving a moment to reflect on that statement. "Unless you know something that oughta change my mind?"

Jeremy's nose whistled when he let out a sharp, wheezing laugh. "You think I'm scared of you, bitch?"

A small nod and the Savior was screaming, clutching a hand that was suddenly two fingers short. It was an impressively clean cut; Kal had spent all morning sharpening his spear.

"You should be," Maggie said dryly.

The little voice in the back of her head, the one that sounded an awful lot like her late husband, told her she was better than this. She wasn't, but Glenn always had a higher opinion of her than she'd deserved. He had never figured out that all he was seeing was himself, reflected in her.

That was alright, because Maggie knew, in her heart of hearts, that if it had been her beneath the cold ground, if it had been *her* skull turned to pulp, Glenn would've stopped at nothing to punish the ones responsible. Gazing down at the barely-out-of-his-teens young man, Maggie's heart didn't so much as flutter.

In any case, it didn't take much for Jeremy's bravado to crumble like sand. Just a couple of fingers, in fact.

"W-what d'you wanna know?" he gasped.

"I heard someone's been keeping you Saviors busy lately." Maggie studied his sweaty face keenly. "Seems an awful lot of you have been turning up dead around these parts. What can you tell me about the ambush near the old windmill?"

A heavy bead of sweat rolled down Jeremy's brow. "I thought that was you?"

Maggie sighed, tapping the radio strapped to her waist. "And who am I?"

Jeremy swallowed thickly. "You're the Widow."

Next to her, Sasha snorted, a harsh, humorless sound. "Your reputation precedes you," she told Maggie.

"This guy doesn't know shit," Kal said with a huff.

Jeremy flinched when Kal raised the spear again. "Listen, okay, listen. You take Saviors in, right? That's what everybody says. You're the Code Orange lady. I can join you. I don't like working for the Saviors, I just follow orders. That's all, I just follow orders." He gasped, breaths quickening in his panic. "Ask Mack, he'll tell you, he's, ah, he's–" he trailed off, only just now realizing who the cindering body belonged to.

"I'm guessing that's Mack?" Sasha asked, indicating the body of the other Savior, the one who had jumped off the burning tower.

Jeremy exhaled harshly. “He was the radio guy. Listen, I… I just go where they tell me, alright? I don’t ask questions. Please, I got a girlfriend, she’s got no one else but me. We were gonna get married. *Please*.”

Maggie’s pistol found its way into her hand. “Don’t worry,” she snarled, “I hear Negan’s got a thing for widows.”

Suddenly, the lookout tower collapsed on itself in a roar of flames. Jeremy took advantage of the commotion and leaped to his feet in a desperate bid for freedom, bolting towards the treeline. He was never going to make it, not with Maggie’s people surrounding him, their faces grim and weapons at the ready.

But the walkers got to him first. They came out of the woods, drawn by the noise and the flames, their eyes glowing red in the firelight. Jeremy screamed as the walkers descended on him in a chorus of tearing flesh and vile, ravenous chewing.

“Don’t touch the dead,” Maggie ordered. “This needs to look clean. We don’t want them coming after Frank.” They’d already prepared a body double – a dead walker with striking resemblance to the old man. Not that it mattered once they’d burned it to a crisp.

“Let’s go home,” Maggie told her people, a ragtag group of former Hilltop residents and a scattering of former Saviors.

Not even in her wildest dreams did Maggie ever imagine teaming up with Saviors, former or otherwise.

It had all started with Gregory’s betrayal. The sniveling coward had ousted Maggie to the Saviors, calling her a “deranged widow with delusions of grandeur.” Well, not Maggie, exactly. He’d told them her name was Marsha.

Why Marsha? God knew. Maybe he’d felt a twinge of guilt, throwing a pregnant woman under the bus. Maybe he’d truly forgotten her name. Jesus had argued that Gregory was simply covering his own backside, getting Maggie out of his hair while also keeping the Hilltop’s deal with Alexandria –their promise to rid them of the Saviors – a secret.

Thankfully, Maggie and Sasha had escaped before the Saviors could even lay eyes on them. It was a precarious situation for a pregnant woman, but Maggie didn’t dare turn back to Alexandria, or any other settlement for that matter. Not with the Saviors hot on “Marsha’s” trail.

They found themselves on the run, joined by Jesus and a handful of disgruntled Hilltop residents. Always moving, camping out in the woods where fewer walkers and Saviors roamed.

And then they met Frank.

Maggie was going to kill him, of course. He was a Savior. She was going to, but his snow-white hair and kind eyes reminded her of her daddy, God rest his soul.

So they talked. And as it turned out, many Saviors weren't happy with the way things were going. Maggie learned that the Saviors' lifestyle included a fair bit of servitude and abuse, and that there were just as many workers as there were soldiers, with no hope of escape. And hope… hope was a dangerous thing to dangle in front of someone desperate enough.

It was a hard pill to swallow, taking those people in, but Maggie couldn't ignore the opportunity knocking at her doorstep – a chance to tear the Saviors apart from the inside out.

It took some work, but little by little, the Widow's influence grew. She stayed hidden, always moving, keeping tabs on the enemy and making a name for herself, even though it wasn't her own.

And then one day, Frank walked in with Dwight.

"They killed my wife," Dwight whispered, hollow and broken. Maggie almost broke his jaw then and there.

In the end, her pragmatic side won over. Having a Savior as high up the ranks as Dwight was a game changer. With his help, they turned more Saviors to their side, took out weapon caches, sowed chaos within Negan's ranks, and devised a plan to spring Daryl free.

All the while, back in Alexandria Rick played the part of a grieving father, keeping his community in tune with the Saviors' demands. Only a few people knew he kept in touch with Maggie; even fewer knew about Eugene's secret ammunition production. Everything was progressing according to plan.

But then the earthquake hit – the one that leveled a small town and left Maggie's ears ringing for days – and everything went sideways. Dwight turned up dead, flushing their plan of rescuing Daryl down the drain.

Things started looking better when a new group – an army, possibly – began taking the Saviors head-on, regretfully taking out some of Maggie's own spies in the process. Maggie's focus now turned to finding this mysterious army, whoever they were, knowing they were her best chance of finally taking the fight to Negan.

Unfortunately, finding those people was proving more difficult than she'd thought. So Maggie sent Jesus to speak to Rick – and find out if the kids' return was more than a rumor – but then Jesus never came back, making her worry he'd gotten caught in the crossfire somehow.

Nevertheless, the Saviors were occupied and exposed. Maggie knew the time to strike was near. They needed to regroup or risk losing everything.

The clock was ticking; after all, Maggie wasn't becoming any less pregnant.

They were making preparations in one of the temporary camps when Maggie's radio burst to life, the line filled with static. It stopped, just as abruptly, before the line opened again to simple white noise. The action was repeated three times, a secret message from one of Maggie's Saviors–turned–spies.

They had received the exact message a few hours ago when the Saviors had set out. The second transmission meant the Saviors had arrived at their destination. Maggie found it useful to time them.

"Three is for Alexandria," Tara pointed out, pulling a crate of apples from the back of a pickup truck. "It's been a while."

"Supply run, probably." Maggie reached for the second crate – *potatoes!* – when one of the former Saviors jumped in and took it instead, nudging her out of the way with a reproachful glare.

"Dude," Tara huffed, rolling her eyes, "you can't lift this, it's heavy."

Maggie followed her to the supply tent with a sheepish sigh. "I know, I know, I just saw those 'taters and my mind went – " she stopped to discreetly wipe the drool from the side of her mouth. "What's new at the Hilltop?"

"Zilch," Tara sighed, setting the crate down. "The doc wants you to come by for an ultrasound as soon as. We'll smuggle you in through the hatch door, like last time." She tossed an apple to Maggie, who caught it, grinning. "He's moonlighting as a veterinarian now; the goat is finally pregnant."

Maggie's eyes lit up. "Cheese!" she exclaimed, mid-chew.

Tara beamed. It was good to see her smiling again, Maggie decided. For weeks since she'd joined them her friend had been swinging from a pendulum of grief and fury. And who could blame her when she'd returned home to so much tragedy?

"By the way, I ran into douchecanoe again," Tara said, referring to Gregory. "He still thinks I'm one of the field workers. He asked me what I'm doing lollygagging. That's what he said – lollygagging." She shrugged off her backpack and began repacking it for the next venture out. "Of course, he invited me to talk about it in his study."

"What'd you say?"

"I respectfully declined."

Maggie snorted. "So you punched him?"

"I didn't punch him," Tara protested, sliding a bottle of water into the backpack. At Maggie's raised eyebrow, she amended, "I didn't punch him in the face."

Before Maggie could tease her further, Sasha stepped into the tent. "Listen to this," she said, holding her radio.

Eavesdropping on the Saviors was always a bit of a cat-and-mouse game. They used multiple frequencies that changed often, and if Maggie hadn't been poaching Saviors right from under Negan's nose, they wouldn't have been able to keep up. Of course, the radios couldn't be tuned in to all frequencies simultaneously, but Sasha had developed a channel-surfing habit lately.

"*–don't think you understand how important this is*." Gregory sounded exasperated. Whatever it was, it seemed like it'd been going on for a while.

"*He's busy*," the Savior on the other line replied curtly.

"*Honestly, I don't know what's going on over there,"* Gregory huffed, "*but this is simply unacceptable! I need to speak to Simon immediately. I have crucial information!*"

"*So?*"

"*So?! Are you–*" Gregory gasped, spluttering. "*I'm sorry, what's your name again?"*

"Don."

"Don what? I want to make sure I have the right person when I report this."

"Keydick," replied the Savior.

"*Well, Mr. Don Keydick, all I'm asking is that you do your job and put me through. I'm not asking for much, just a bit of competence. If you don't connect me to Simon, I'm afraid you'll be fully responsible for the resulting fallout.*"

"*Is that a threat?*" asked the Savior dryly.

"*No! No, of course not*," Gregory backpedaled immediately. "*Listen, I think we got off on the wrong foot here–*"

This went on for a while. Maggie gave an exasperated sigh. "Does he actually have anything?"

"He refuses to say until they pass him through to Simon," Sasha replied. She looked at Tara. "Did you notice anything unusual at the Hilltop?"

Tara shook her head, sitting down next to the rickety table. Then she frowned. "Well, there was the new guy."

"What new guy?" Maggie asked, eyebrow raised.

"He came in with us. He wanted to know– he was–" Tara hesitated, blinking heavily. "Woah." She winced, touching her brow as if in pain.

"Are you okay?" Maggie said in concern, handing her a bottle of water. "Tara?"

"I'm fine," Tara said, taking the bottle. "Weird headache, that's all."

Sasha lifted the tent's canvas flap. "Andy, can you come over here?"

Andy had made the trip to the Hilltop with Tara. He was one of the residents who'd left with Maggie after Gregory's betrayal. Amazingly, Gregory had never even clued into that fact, which allowed Andy the freedom to slip in and out of the Hilltop without Gregory realizing anything was out of the ordinary.

"Yeah?" said Andy. He frowned at hearing Gregory's voice over the radio, still arguing with the Savior. "What's going on?"

"We're not sure," Maggie said, rubbing Tara's back for comfort. "Did anything unusual happen at the Hilltop?"

Andy's gaze darted between them. "Not really?" His expressive face turned to a frown. "Well, the goat's pregnant."

"What about the new guy?" Maggie asked, slightly exasperated.

Andy's frown deepened. "What new guy?"

"He walked in with us," said Tara, still rubbing her temple with a pained expression. "Or… he drove in?"

"Oh, yeah," said Andy, chewing on his lower lip thoughtfully. He seemed unconcerned. "Maybe."

"Did you two meet a ghost?" Sasha asked in a disbelieving tone.

Maggie's attention was pulled back to the radio, realizing that Gregory had finally gotten through to Simon. "Shh, listen."

"*I assure you this isn't like last time*," Gregory was saying, timid now that he was talking to the boss. "*It's– it's one of those people you told me about. I couldn't believe it. This– this thug, he just waltzed in like he owns the place. Of course, from your excellent description, I recognized him immediately; tall feller, feminine hair, and boy, the attitude…! I'm sure I don't have to tell you that I won't abide by all this talk of insurgency and insubordination, you know I won't stand for that. That doesn't fly here at the Hilltop Colony, no sir. I had to inform you straight away!"*

"He *was* really tall," Tara stated, albeit tentatively.

Maggie's mouth thinned. It sounded like one of the people they'd been looking for had made his way to the Hilltop. Unfortunately, he made a mistake, approaching Gregory. A mistake Maggie had made herself, once. She knew they needed to warn him, but Maggie couldn't risk showing her face near the Hilltop, not with the Saviors inbound.

"Tara, Andy, can you take another Hilltop run?" she asked. As far as Gregory was concerned, Andy had never left the colony, and Tara was a resident as well. No one else knew her well enough to say otherwise. "Tara, are you good to travel?"

Tara blinked. “Yeah, yeah. It’s just a headache. I’m fine.”

“We’re not that far out, if you leave now you might make it before the Saviors do. If you can – warn this guy, whoever he is, but keep your head down. Use the emergency channel if you get into trouble.” Maggie picked up Tara’s backpack and handed it over. “I’m gonna take Route-55, go around.”

Tara’s eyes widened. “Route- you’re going to Alexandria?”

Maggie nodded, placing her hand on top of Tara’s. “I’m going to talk to Rick. Tara, you find out who these people are. It’s time we worked together.” She exhaled slowly. “It’s time we *all* worked together.”

Lovelorn

Chapter Notes

PREVIOUSLY:
Daryl escapes the Saviors following months of captivity. Dean and Daryl are new buddies. Sam is doing Sam things in absentia. Maggie is a rebel princess. Dean really wants to find Cas, please, any day now.

Wings of a butterfly: Without Carl's interference, Daryl doesn't escape the Saviors as quickly. At this point, Daryl still believes Maggie died the night Glenn did (if you recall, Daryl was there when Negan was told "the sick girl" died).

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The compass was lighter than it looked, fragile and out of place in Dean's battleworn hand. It was an antique, which of course it was. It was a magical object, or whatever.

One did not simply *imbue* magic into something that coulda been plucked outta Dick's Sporting Goods clearance basket. No, you'd pour that shit into a friggin' priceless vintage nautical compass-and-sundial thing, made out of glass, brass, and whatever bodily fluids Sam's ex-girlfriend used when she'd turned the compass into Dean's personal quest item.

"I hope you find him," the witch had said, sympathy overflowing her pretty brown eyes. She'd been a decent person, the whole 'sex cannibal' thing notwithstanding.

Of course, activating the spell required even *more* body fluids. Specifically, Dean's. Specifically, Dean's blood. It was all 'something something, lovelorn blood, something something, hallowed ground' yada yada.

Dean's blood wasn't *lovelorn*, thank you very much, even if the spell seemed to like it. And whaddayaknow, here he was holed out in a church. Couldn't get more hallowed than that.

He hardly felt the sting anymore. Blood trickled down the sundial's protruding wedge to the compass' glass face underneath. He swallowed a gasp at the sudden pressure in his chest, almost like his heart was being squeezed by an invisible hand. As always, the sensation passed after a few brief moments. Impatient, Dean thumbed the blood off the glass.

"Give us a spin, sweetheart," Dean muttered. The compass' needle quivered, fighting to remain northbound. Then it began to turn; slowly at first, then faster and faster and faster, until its shape was lost in a blur.

He felt a sudden, sharp pull in his gut just as the needle snapped into place, its little arrow pointing in a direction that *wasn't* north. It was more than a direction. Dean's veins

thrummed, overflowing with the absolute certainty that wherever he was, whatever he was up to, *Cas was close*.

Only Dean was *here*, stuck in a creepy old church waiting for his dumbass little brother to come back from an unnecessary supply run, with a hole in his leg and a fuckload of spiders for company.

Oh, and that other guy.

Now that he knew what to expect, he wasn't as startled by the man's near silent appearance. "Damn it, Daryl," he grumbled anyway, snapping the compass shut. "Wear a friggin' bell or something, Jesus."

He was getting better at interpreting Daryl's communication cues, which mainly involved side-eyed glances and/or grunts of alternating tones and durations. If Dean was reading the manual correctly, *this* particular grunt either spelled "*Hello*" or "*I'mma 'bout to get stabby*." Daryl was a nuanced guy, Dean was finding out.

"Come on, man," Dean grumbled as he shoved the compass into the safety of his pocket. "I thought we were past this."

"Your brother ain't back."

"No, he ain't," Dean sighed, shifting to ease the tension in his injured leg.

As a hunter, he had a duty of trust toward his partner – Sam was a big boy, he could handle himself. As a big brother, he was doing his best to quell the little voice in the back of his head, the one that sounded an awful lot like his father, telling him to get off his ass and make sure Sammy was safe.

"Where the hell have you been, anyway?" Dean wondered. Too late, he noticed his sleeve was still bunched around his bicep, displaying his shredded arm in all its glory. He shoved it down with a scowl, bloodstains be damned.

Daryl followed Dean's every movement with a suspicious glare.

"You got somethin' to say?" Dean snapped. Then he noticed what Daryl had strapped to his back. He'd thought it was a weapon Daryl had picked up somewhere, but no, it was an aluminum crutch. A bit old, but still in decent shape, with only a small blooming of rust under the handle.

"That for me?" Dean asked. Keeping the weight off his injured leg seemed like an inspired idea.

Daryl, however, made no move to hand it over. Instead, he tossed one of the hex bags onto the desk.

"It don't work," Daryl grunted, wearing a narrowed-eyed glare that was a few shades frownier than seemed warranted for a *dirty freakin' thief*.

“‘Cause you didn’t activate it, dipshit,” Dean grunted in annoyance, snatching the hex bag from the desk. “Second of all – this is *my* magic thingamajig. You don’t touch another man’s thingamajig without asking. Who the hell raised you?”

Daryl stiffened.

Oh, hit a nerve, did I?

Dean hesitated, fingers itching for his handgun. *This is what you get for picking up strays, you dumb asshole,* he told himself.

Under his sunken cheeks and sallow skin, Daryl was clearly a capable fighter. It didn't take a genius to see that he wore violence on his sleeve like a shackle. But… he didn't lash out. And he *had* gone out of his way to pick up a crutch for Dean. That was a nice gesture, wasn’t it?

“Fine,” Dean sighed, making up his mind. “You wanna see a magic trick? Let's see a magic trick.”

He got to his feet, managing to suppress a pained groan with moderate success. He was a fast healer, which he knew was a lingering effect from Cas' magic fingers working him over all these years, but fucking *Christ*, getting shot sucked.

He stopped to swing his duffel bag over his shoulder and was halfway to the door when the crutch was shoved in his path with a wordless glare. “Thanks,” Dean muttered, accepting the offer.

The church was no less creepy in the light of day than it was at night. The old wooden pews creaked with every gust of wind, and the stained glass windows cast eerie, fragmented shadows on the walls. Straining to listen for any signs of trouble, Dean hobbled outside, his crutch firmly rooted under his armpit.

He scanned the surroundings, squinting in the sunlight. Seeing no immediate lurkers nearby, he dropped the duffel bag to the ground and turned to Daryl. “Lesson number one: magic makes you bleed. A lot.” He rolled his eyes and sighed. “I don’t know why, man. My brother’s the one who’s good with this crap. Anyway, watch this.”

He rolled up his sleeve – the cut on his arm was still bleeding sluggishly – and shook a few drops across both hex bags. He smirked as Daryl’s eyes glazed over, the spell taking effect.

“What the fuck?” Daryl startled, jerking his head like a dog shaking off water. He blinked rapidly, fighting to look at Dean even though his gaze kept sliding away. “Stay still, asshole.”

Dean caught Daryl’s hand, causing him to flinch violently. “You touch somebody, it wears off,” he explained as Daryl's startled gaze focused on him. He turned Daryl's palm upward and dropped the second hex bag into his hand. “It doesn't make you invisible, but people ain't gonna wanna look at you. They’ll still feel you out there, and it’ll freak ‘em out.”

Releasing Daryl’s hand, Dean took a step back. He snapped his fingers and added, “You're kinda like Swayze in Ghost.”

“I can still see you,” Daryl grunted, squinting at him.

“Yeah, ‘cause we’re spell buddies now.” Dean looked around, deciding on another demonstration. “It works on the dead, too. See the guy up ahead, the one that sorta looks like Tarantino?”

The creature lumbered by the road, striking an awkward figure with its wide shoulders and hunched stance. The thing stared blankly into space, empty and listless.

Dean rolled his eyes and cupped a hand over his mouth. “HEY, ASSHOLE! YEAH, YOU!” he yelled, making the creature flinch. “PULP FICTION IS OVERRATED!”

The dead Tarantino twitched, its head swiveling in their general direction. It gave a low, low, moan and began to stumble their way, its movement slow and sluging.

“You’re part of the scenery,” Dean explained, gesturing at the creature. “It can hear us, but it can’t lock in. It’s like we’re background noise to it.” He watched as the creature continued to wander forward aimlessly, never quite focusing on them. “See? No threat.”

Dean cleared his throat, feeling a sudden bout of anxiety. “Hey man, you know I didn’t mean that, right? Pulp Fiction’s a masterpiece.”

Daryl grunted in affirmation.

“Cool.” Dean cleared his throat. “HEY, QUENTIN!” he shouted at the dead creature, “KILL BILL SHOULD HAVE BEEN ONE MOVIE!”

Tarantino got close enough that Dean could hear its teeth snapping. He clicked his fingers next to the creature's right ear, snatching them back just as it tried to bite them. The creature's jaws clamped down on empty air, its focus still unfixed.

“You know what,” Dean mused, peering closely at the undead creature. “I think this might actually be Tarantino.”

“This thing works on herds, too?” Daryl asked, waving his hand in front of its face, but the creature's eyes remained glassy and unfocused, as if he were just a shadow in its peripheral vision.

Dean shrugged. “Yeah, but it’s risky. The minute you accidentally touch one of ‘em–” he tapped the dead creature’s forehead. Instantly, it gave a sharp growl and lunged at Dean. He shoved it back with his crutch. “Poof. You’re just another club member.” He wiped his hand on his pant leg. “Eugh, gross.”

“You use it all the time?” Daryl wondered, shoving a knife through Tarantino’s eye.

“Nah. The effect only lasts about four hours, give or take a piss break. Second, you overuse this shit, you can get addicted. Trust me, you don’t wanna go there. Third, ingredients ain’t exactly easy to come by. I’ve only got a few of these babies left.”

Frowning, Daryl studied the hex bag in his hand.

“I know what you’re thinking,” said Dean with an easy grin, “feels like cheating, don’t it? Like you’re playing on easy mode. Well, to tell you the truth: I agree.” He shrugged with a sniff. “But seeing what those Savior assholes are up to, I’m not so sure they deserve a fair fight. And it just so happens that I’m on the clock; I’ve got my own business to take care of. So, I wanna finish this quickly and be on my merry way.”

He made to pick up his duffel bag, but Daryl beat him to it, throwing it over his shoulder. “You said four hours?” Daryl asked.

Dean’s mouth stretched into a slow smile. “I think I know just the place.”

There was no denying the assholes had nice toys.

Dean had his eye set on one of the Saviors’ bases: an auto repair shop turned safehouse. It was going to be his and Sam’s next target after they realized the workshop was still in use. The place wasn’t as heavily guarded as it should’ve been, probably because the assholes figured the freaking turret guns stationed on the rooftop – capable of reducing a human body into fine mist – were enough of a deterrent.

If Dean happened to shed a few tears while rigging them to explode, well, no one needed to know.

One thing was clear, though – Sam had never set a single gigantic foot in this place. This left far too many possible pathways for Dean's comfort.

Dean knew why Sam was so hell-bent on destroying the Saviors. He got it, okay? Contrary to popular belief, Dean’s head wasn't *always* stuck up his own asshole.

Cas was Sam’s friend too, but finding his fine feathered ass had always been Dean’s quest. It hadn’t been Sam who’d dragged them across a death-infested country, chasing one shaky lead after another. Except for a brief respite of happiness with the witch – and *that* had ended badly for everyone involved – Sam had lived his life as if he’d been relegated to a supporting character in Dean’s angst-riddled love story.

So, really, Dean couldn’t blame Sam for wanting a cause of his own. The Saviors sure as hell deserved the beatdown, but it was never about them, not really. They represented more than just an enemy; they were a chance for Sam to forge his own path and make a stand for something he believed in.

But Christ, the *timing*. Now Dean had *two* missing-person cases on his hands.

At least Daryl was getting some well-deserved payback. He dropped the hex bag the minute they were past the base’s defenses, catching the enemy off guard in increasingly creative – and destructive – ways. Dean had never seen anyone crushed by a tire avalanche before, but

really it was the Saviors' own fault for stacking them so high in the first place. Goddamn OSHA violation, it was.

“Got that outta your system?” Dean asked, double-tapping a corpse that was in the process of reanimating. “You got ‘em all?”

Breathing hard, Daryl flung a wiry arm in the direction of the toilets. “Sonuvabitch ran.”

“I got it,” Dean said, limping to the closed door.

As monstrous as the Saviors were, Dean couldn’t bring himself to kill a man on the toilet. Some lines just weren’t meant to be crossed. He had left his crutch outside, finding it easier to limp around now that his adrenaline was kicking. Positioning himself against the wall – there was always a chance the guy was gonna start blastin’ – he dropped the hex bag on the ground and knocked.

“Occupied?” he called out.

There was a pause. The voice on the other end was shaky, filled with anxiety. “Any chance you’ll take my word that I’m on your side?”

Dean glanced at Daryl, eyebrows raised. Teeth flashing, Daryl shook his head. That was all the confirmation Dean needed.

“Sure,” he called, all pleasant-like.

An audible sigh came through the door. “Please don’t shoot me.”

The flimsy lock clicked open, and a young man stepped out with his hands raised, a knife held loosely in surrender. With a snarl, Daryl flung the young man around and into the wall, taking the knife and patting him down for more weapons. Once finished, Daryl spun him back and pressed a pistol to his temple, keeping him pinned against the wall.

Dean watched the Savior closely. He was on the scrawny side, with a scraggly half-beard that probably made him look older than he really was. “Talk,” Dean said sternly.

The young man swallowed hard as he felt the cold metal of the pistol against his temple. “My name is Alden,” he managed through a wince, “I work for the Widow.”

Judging by Daryl’s angry little huff, that didn’t ring any bells for him either. Dean rubbed his forehead tiredly. “Okay, I’ll bite – that’s supposed to mean something?”

Alden’s breaths came in shallow, rapid bursts, but despite his fear, he managed to muster a shaky, disarming smile. “Probably not to you, but maybe to Daryl?” His smile turned to a gasp when Daryl shoved him harder into the wall.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Daryl demanded furiously, pressing the pistol harder against Alden’s temple.

“I never met her in person, only a few people do,” Alden said quickly, wincing as the pistol dug into his skin. “We work in teams; it’s too dangerous otherwise, in case someone gets caught. The Widow had a plan to free Daryl – fake his death so the Saviors don’t come looking, and nobody gets the iron.”

Dean frowned. “Tall tale, kid.”

“I swear, it’s the truth. I was part of the rescue team.” Alden’s gaze swept past Daryl’s shoulder, as if only noticing the bodies strewn about the floor for the first time. “*That* was my team,” he choked.

Dean followed his gaze, mouth drying. *Ah, shit.*

Breath stuttering, Daryl loosened his hold on Alden. “That’s bullshit,” he said in a low, dangerous tone.

“I’m not lying,” Alden insisted, voice firmer now that the pistol wasn’t digging a hole in his skin. “The Widow gives people hope. They say she’s got a baby on the way, so she’s –”

Daryl socked the kid right across the jaw. “Shut up!”

“Hey,” Dean stepped in before Daryl could land another punch. “Who’s he talking about?”

“Nobody, it’s a trick,” Daryl growled, struggling to get past Dean. He was shaking violently.

Holding his jaw, Alden shook his head. “Beth,” he groaned.

Daryl froze. “What’d you say?”

“I was – I was supposed to tell you, ‘Beth’, so you’d trust me.” He dropped his hand with a wince, working his jaw. “Maybe I should’ve led with that?” he joked half-heartedly.

Daryl’s expression crumbled, a mix of shock and raw emotion washing over his gaunt face. He staggered back, struggling to maintain his composure. Moving unsteadily, he grabbed for his dropped hex bag, hiding behind the spell. Of course, Dean could still see him – they were spell buddies! – but it was probably pretty disconcerting for Alden.

Dean’s chest swelled with pride. “Atta boy, Daryl. Catching on quick.”

“What just happened?” Alden asked, blinking.

“He just needs a moment,” Dean said, his tone reassuring. “Where do we find this Widow of yours, kid?”

Alden hesitated. “I don’t know,” he admitted, “but… I overheard someone say Simon's crew is headed for the Hilltop Colony. I heard they’re looking for someone.”

Dean frowned, recalling their first encounter with the Saviors. “Mustache man?”

“I’m sorry?”

“Never mind,” Dean said, letting out a long exhale. As his adrenaline faded, the wound in his leg began throbbing like a bitch. “Hilltop Colony, that’s the one with the big house, right?”

He and Sam had passed by the place before. It was a small farming community a day’s ride away. They’d left it alone when they realized it was occupied by a different group, not the Saviors.

Now that Dean knew there was a secret rebellion in the works, this whole sidequest business was getting interesting. Plus, Dean was beginning to get an inkling of where Sam was headed – didn’t he always try to steer them toward people? Sentimental idiot.

“Okay, kid, here’s what we’re gonna do,” Dean started, bending with a groan to pick up Alden’s knife. “I’ve got this place rigged to blow in about twenty minutes.” He slipped the knife into the holster on Alden’s belt, startling him slightly. “The way I see it, you’ve got two choices: you can take a ride with us *or* you run home to that loser Negan and keep doing your whole *Spy Kid* thing. I ain’t judging; must be exciting.” He gave his best disarming smile. “Either way, you can’t stay here. It’s about to get *hot*.”

He shook his head. “I can’t come with you. I’m – “

Dean thumped Alden’s shoulder. “Just try not to get yourself killed.” He was about to turn away and collect his own hex bag but then paused. “By the way,” he said, “I’m looking for someone. Blue eyes, brown hair, kind of frowny, like this–” he squinted in his best Castiel fashion. “Likes to give people the heebies. Ring any bells?”

Alden frowned, thinking. “Not really, but I’ll keep an eye out,” he offered.

Dean smiled sadly. “Thanks, kid.”

Chapter End Notes

Dean's a hoot.

Demonology 101

Chapter Notes

PREVIOUSLY: The Saviors abduct Father Gabriel and Negan is up to no good.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The journey to the Saviors' compound took long hours. By the end of it, Gabriel was struggling to unpeel his fingers from the biker's leather-clad waist. His legs, stiff from the extended ride, crumbled underneath him the moment his feet hit solid ground.

Gravel digging into his palms, Gabriel leaned forward and emptied his stomach's contents. A chorus of laughter erupted around him, each chuckle and jeer hitting him like a dagger. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, tasting bile on his tongue.

"Shit, man, was the ride that bad?" The bike's owner grabbed Gabriel's arm and hauled him to his feet. "I bet you never felt this much power between your legs before, huh?" he said with a smirk, wiggling his eyebrows.

Gabriel's face flushed with embarrassment. "I'm fine," he muttered, the world swaying around him. He forced himself to remain standing, every muscle in his body protesting.

Scoffing, the man released Gabriel's arm. He stumbled backward and nearly choked on his own spittle when a familiar death-rattle hiss filled his ears. Gabriel spun around to find a gaunt face pressing against a chain-link fence. The walker was missing both of its arms, but that didn't stop it from snapping its teeth and snarling, leaving traces of its decaying flesh on the metal.

Gabriel's heart pounded as he took in the gruesome sight. The walker wasn't alone; behind it, the yard stretched out, teeming with more of the undead, filling the air with the stench of their rot.

Suddenly, the armless walker was yanked back. Gabriel's eyes widened as he took in the sight of a teenage boy pulling the walker away from the fence. Dressed in rags, the boy's face was mottled with various cuts and bruises, his hair matted and sticking to his sweaty face. A prominent black eye puffed one of his eyelids closed, the skin around it swollen and discolored.

"Sorry," the boy mumbled through a split lip, his voice barely audible, "Sherry got loose."

Before Gabriel could say anything, the biker pounded on the fence, the force of his blows making the chain links rattle violently. "Get back to work!" he barked.

Shrinking, the boy nodded. He moved with a slight limp, favoring one side. The walker snapped its teeth uselessly as it was dragged away, its head lolling to the side.

Gabriel swallowed hard, his throat dry. “Why is he in there?” he whispered hoarsely.

“‘Cause he’s a little asshole, that’s why,” the biker responded callously before lobbing a huge ball of spit on the ground. “You wanna join him? Keep asking questions like that, you’ll be in there shoveling dead people’s shit in no time.”

The acidic taste still burning his throat, Gabriel took a steadying breath and forced himself to turn around, to face the Saviors and whatever came next. He didn’t know why Negan wanted him brought here, but there had to be a reason. He could use that.

These people might laugh at him now, but he couldn’t let them see him falter again. Squaring his shoulders, Gabriel locked eyes with the biker, who smirked at him.

“I appreciate your hospitality,” Gabriel said politely, smiling in a way he knew people occasionally found unsettling.

The biker’s expression shifted, a flicker of uncertainty crossing his face. “Yeah, whatever,” he scoffed.

Hands clasped politely in front of him, Gabriel allowed himself a moment to take in the sights. He knew the Saviors’ numbers were great, but seeing it in person was another matter altogether. Gabriel’s skin prickled as people – more people than he’d seen in *years* – milled about their business, many of whom looked at him with undisguised contempt. He resisted the urge to straighten his collar.

The Sanctuary loomed large and imposing, a former industrial complex repurposed into a fortress. The sprawling compound buzzed with activity, the clamor of voices and machinery filling the air. Guard towers overlooked the yard, manned by sentries with watchful eyes and ready weapons. He scanned the area, noting every bit of it to memory.

Every detail could be crucial. After all, Gabriel was brought here for a reason.

“You feeling alright, Pops?” a feminine voice called out, sounding bored.

Gabriel turned to greet the approaching Savior, a blonde woman with a neck tattoo who, as he recalled, often accompanied Dwight on tributes. He opened his mouth to offer an empty greeting, but the words died on his lips when he saw the person walking next to her.

“Rosita,” he gasped.

He couldn’t believe she was here, right in front of him. He hadn't seen her in weeks, not since the last time he had found her in his church, a pistol in her hands and tears streaming down her face. The following morning, she didn't show up for guard duty.

They sent people to look for her, but she’d left no trace. For weeks, the guilt had been eating away at him. He had known about the gun, had seen how ready she was to throw her life away in a desperate attempt to take down Negan. Despite their best efforts, the search parties

came back empty-handed, and Gabriel was left grappling with the fear that he had failed her when she needed him most.

The look on Rosita's face was a mix of defiance and exhaustion, even though she avoided his gaze completely. "What the hell is this, Laura?" she demanded, hands planted on her hips.

Laura shrugged. "Boss wants him." She scuffed the gavel with her boot, covering Gabriel's vomit.

Rosita gritted her teeth. "He doesn't belong here."

Neither do you, Gabriel wanted to say. His mind struggled to process Rosita's presence *here*, among the Saviors.

Swallowing hard, he said, "Rosita… We thought you were… *I* thought you were dead. We looked everywhere for you."

Rosita scoffed and looked away, her teeth clenched. When she finally met his eyes, her expression was pained. "I got tired of being on the losing side," she said, her voice laced with bitterness.

The blonde woman's teeth flashed as she smiled. "You're still part of the Loser's Club, Ro." With an air of familiarity that was wholly unexpected, Laura bumped Rosita's stiff shoulder with her own. "You're not one of us yet, not until Negan says you are."

"I am one of you," Rosita spat out, entirely unconvincing.

Laura smirked. "You will be." Turning to Gabriel, she said, "She's on probation, Pops. Same as you."

"Probation?" Gabriel repeated. His gaze darted to Rosita, but she refused to meet his gaze once more.

"Special privileges," Laura replied, mouth curling into a sly smile. "You get the VIP treatment and a 24/7 escort at no cost, at least until we figure out if we like you. No weapons, though." She sighed. "Turn around and spread your arms out."

Gabriel hesitated for a moment before complying, turning around and extending his arms. Laura moved quickly, her hands expertly patting him down with professional efficiency. She checked every pocket, every seam, missing nothing. Her touch was cold. He held back a gasp when she kicked his legs apart, running her hands along each one, from his ankles to his groin. Each movement was thorough and impersonal.

The biker, watching the process with a lewd grin, leaned in close. "How's that for a spiritual experience, eh, Padre?" His breath was sour on Gabriel's face as he whispered, "You, uh, ever been this close to a woman before?"

"Don't be a creep, Dex," Laura said flatly, retrieving Gabriel's knife from its holster. She held it up, examining it briefly before tucking it away. "All clear."

Gabriel straightened his gaze. “Celibacy is not a requirement for ordination in the Episcopal Church.” He smiled. “And I haven't always been a priest.”

Dex threw his head back and laughed. “Holy shit,” he hooted, “preacher man’s got *game!*”

Laura rolled her eyes but couldn’t suppress a small smile. “Alright, that’s enough. Come along, Pops, Negan’s waiting for you.”

Exhaling sharply, Gabriel nodded. Without another word, he followed Laura deeper into the Sanctuary. She led them through a series of turns, her pace brisk and unyielding. Every corner turned revealed another layer of the Saviors stronghold. The sheer scale of it was daunting, a maze of dimly lit corridors and sprawling halls. People moved with purpose, casting wary glances at him as he passed. The occasional sound of a distant shout echoed through the corridors.

Rosita walked a step behind Laura. He kept trying to meet her eyes, but her face remained turned away, expression unreadable.

Finally, they arrived at a large, reinforced door. Before he could step inside, Laura drew his attention to a basin of water left on a table by the door. “Do your thing,” she ordered sharply, arms crossed over her chest.

“I beg your pardon?” he asked, confused.

Laura sighed. “You know, holy water or whatever.”

Gabriel hesitated, caught off guard. He lifted a hand to touch the edge of the basin. The metal sweated with condensation, the water freshly chilled. “I don’t understand,” he said. He glanced at Rosita, but her expression betrayed her own state of confusion.

For the first time, Laura seemed to lose her confidence. She dropped her arms to her sides and huffed. “Dude, I’m working with the same information as you. Just get this over with.” A flush rose in Laura's cheeks. “You are a real priest, aren’t you? This isn’t a fetish thing?”

“Why do people keep asking me that?” Gabriel wondered, cringing.

Laura scoffed before leaning closer, whispering, “While you’re here, try to avoid Davey, okay?” She shuddered.

Gabriel blinked. “Noted.”

“Chop chop,” Laura said, gesturing towards the basin.

With a sense of foreboding, Gabriel stepped forward, dipping his fingers into the cool water. He closed his eyes briefly, muttering a blessing and making the sign of the cross over the basin. Invoking the Holy Spirit in this place felt like blasphemy.

“There,” he said softly.

Laura lifted the basin and placed it in his arms. “Don’t drop this,” she said, giving him a curt nod. She then held her hand to the door and knocked.

The door opened a crack, revealing a short man with a narrowed-eyed expression. He looked Gabriel up and down before nodding in approval, “Get in,” he said gruffly, “and watch your step.”

It was a well-lit torture chamber. The thought rang oddly in Gabriel’s mind.

A woman was strapped to a chair in the middle of the room. There were more people present, but Gabriel could not look away from the horrifying scene. The woman’s head hung limply to the side and her body, clad in nothing but a short nightgown, was a canvas of crisscrossing cuts. Most horrifying of all, two metal stakes had been driven through her hands, holding them immobile to the chair’s arms.

It didn’t escape his attention that the woman was placed over a circular sigil, with what looked to be a pentagram in its center.

Was this a Satanic ritual of some kind?

The cool water splashed onto his hands as stepped inside the room, fighting to maintain his composure. The air was cloying with the metallic scent of blood.

The woman’s eyelids fluttered. “Help me,” she groaned.

Gabriel casted a glance at Rosita, who stood rigidly by the door, her expression unreadable.

Laura’s earlier confidence seemed to falter for a moment before she straightened up, her professional mask slipping back into place. “Here he is, boss,” she announced, her voice steady.

There he was, Gabriel thought numbly, staring at Negan with a newfound dread.

At the far end of the room, Negan stood by a round table, the cheery polka-dotted tablecloth a stark juxtaposition to the array of torture instruments laid out on top of it. He was wiping his face with a towel, his white t-shirt flecked with blood.

Negan dragged the towel down his neck. “Oh, this is gonna be so much fun,” he intoned gleefully, flinging the towel into the chest of a nearby lackey. Turning to Gabriel, he opened his arms wide and announced, “Man of the hour!”

“H-hello,” Gabriel stammared, fighting to keep his composure.

“I know what you’re thinking, Father,” Negan said casually as he walked slowly towards Gabriel, a sly grin blooming on his face. “You’re thinking: what sort of freaky-deaky BDSM club did I walk into? And just *whose ass* do I gotta eat to get a drink around here?”

Negan chuckled. “Unfortunately, this isn’t that kind of party.” The woman flinched violently as he idled past her. Sidling up to Gabriel, he added in a theatrical whisper, “But for the record? My safeword is *Saigon*.” He lifted a finger to his lips and winked.

“We didn’t bring him here for *this*,” a man with a smooth English accent interjected, his expression mildly disapproving.

Negan rolled his eyes. “Don’t be such a buzzkill, Vic!” His grin never wavered as he turned back to Gabriel. “Man’s gotta see what we’re fighting for.”

Hoarsely, Gabriel whispered, “What are you fighting for?”

Negan beamed. “Glad you asked!” He slung an arm around Gabriel’s shoulders, the water in the basin sloshing as he pulled them towards the woman, right to the edge of the circular drawing. She shrank back into her seat, as far as the restraints allowed her.

“You see this bitch here?” Negan’s arm tightened around Gabriel’s trembling shoulder. “She’s been staking you people out for a while.” He frowned down at her. “What d’you call yourself again, sweetheart? Jada? Jadis? Jado?”

The woman’s breaths came in bursts of shallow, panicked gasps. “Anne,” she said, gasping. “Please, I’m Anne.” She turned her tear-streaked face to Gabriel. “Father,” she sobbed, “help me.”

Negan let out a loud snort. “Whatever. So, this bitch, right? She’s got *her* folks stalking *your* folks, and of course, *your* folks work for *my* folks. You can imagine that I’m not totally fucking *cool* with *her* folks stalking *my-folks-by-proxy*. You see what I’m getting at?” He clicked his tongue in disapproval and dipped his hand in the basin of water, fingers swirling in the cool liquid.

Gabriel stared at the trembling woman before him.

Negan chuckled lightly, squeezing Gabriel’s shoulder. “Now these garbage people – and boy do I mean that literally – they weren’t after your food, they didn’t want your medicine, oh no sir. *They* were gonna stick their nasty, filthy, disgusting E.coli-riddled fingers up your assholes and turn y’all into more goddamn *garbage people*.” He shuddered violently. “And no Tetanus shot was ever gonna save you from *that* fate.”

He’s insane, Gabriel thought numbly.

Negan sighed. “Saving people, that’s kind of my jam. We *are* the Saviors. And me and my boys? We provide protection to others.”

With a sudden, deliberate motion, Negan brought his hand out of the basin and flung a handful of water at the woman. “I just couldn’t let that shit slide!” Negan shouted.

The change was instantaneous. The icy water *steamed* as it hit the woman’s skin, like it had somehow turned to acid. A terrible stench filled the air.

Sulfur, Gabriel’s mind whispered, his back hitting the wall with a thud. Clutching the basin of holy water to his chest, he began to pray. “*Almighty and everlasting God, who art the creator and preserver of all mankind: We humbly beseech thee to keep us from all evil–*”

The woman –*Anne?*– gave an unnatural growl as her flesh boiled, her eyes flashing a full, pitch black. Gone was the frightened, tortured woman. The thing that stared back at Negan in contempt was… something different.

"– *Surround us with thy holy angels, that we may be defended and strengthened by their presence* –"

Negan pointed at Gabriel. "None of that shit," he growled, expression hard.

Gabriel clamped his mouth shut.

The thing in the chair laughed, a sound that was deep, guttural, and utterly inhuman. "You kill my people? I make more." Her black eyes somehow focused on Negan as she chuckled. "I come back. Maybe I take yours."

That seemed to catch Negan by surprise. "Wait, you thought?..." He looked at Gabriel before dragging a hand down his face, shaking his head in disbelief. "Wow."

"Gabriel," Rosita whispered as she slid closer, her back pressed to the wall. Her hands found his elbow as she stared, eyes wide, at the creature in the middle of the room. "Is this really happening?"

"I am so *embarrassed* for you!" Negan told the woman, his voice hoarse from holding back laughter. He turned to his lackeys and chortled, "Can you believe this shit? This black eyed bitch doesn't know who I am!"

Loud snickers echoed across the room.

The creature – the *demon* – pouted. "Don't have to be mean."

Negan shook his head, flicking tears of laughter from the corner of his eyes. "You thought I brought *him* in for an exorcism?" He jerked his thumb in Gabriel's direction, chuckling heartily. "No, sweetheart, this isn't that kind of party. Besides, I got bigger fish to fry than you."

Still chuckling, he went and picked out a shiny silver blade from the table spread. The woman's black eyes widened at the sight of it.

Negan, brandishing a boyish grin, turned back to the demon. "Nah. You're just a demonstration."

He drove the knife into her chest. She screamed, sparks flying from her lips as light pulsed behind her skin.

As the light dimmed and the woman slumped in the chair, Negan gave a theatrical little bow. "Service, rendered. You're welcome."

The scent of sulfur was suffocating, filling the room with a nauseating stench. Gabriel kept staring at the woman's – *the demon's* – lifeless corpse, a wordless prayer stuck on his lips.

“Saddle up, Padre,” said Negan, his eyes sparkling. “We got work to do.”

Chapter End Notes

And there goes the Garbage People subplot. You CANNOT tell me they weren't demons in TWD canon. What the hell, seriously.

How did Rosita end up with the Saviors? Please check out the connected story in the series, Hell Hath No Fury ❤️

Crossroads

Chapter Notes

PREVIOUSLY:
Castiel boops Simon's noggin and is also really good at weirding people out. Angel vibes, yo. I'm not making this up, it's canon! Simon continues to be upset about the Winchesters. Gregory is a little weasel who kicked Maggie out of the Hilltop. Also, Maggie is a *rebel warrior*. Enjoy!!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Despite its peaceful, idyllic appearance, beneath the veneer of tranquility, the Hilltop Colony saw its fair share of turmoil. There was more to running a community than feeding the livestock or keeping the dead at bay. It took a strong leader to keep the squabbling masses in line, to offer a firm, guiding hand – someone with conviction, charisma, and sheer will. Someone with the fortitude to make the harsh but *necessary* choices.

Where would society be without the ruling class? What was a hive without its queen?

And yes, certain privileges were to be expected, but they *paled* in comparison to the *sacrifices* made along the way – the *burdens* of responsibility that weighed on a leader's shoulders.

Gregory knew that burden better than anyone, even if none of them truly appreciated it.

Those ingrates! The crops, the walls, the mansion… none of it would still be standing if it wasn't for his leadership, his connections, his *vision*. Who was it who was most trusted by the Saviors? Who kept the place from burning to the ground? Gregory. It was always Gregory, pulling strings from behind the scenes while they whispered and conspired against him.

And now this – this *betrayal*. Someone had gone and whisked off that tall fella the moment Gregory's back was turned, leaving him to face the consequences. *Typical.*

"*Gone?*" Simon echoed, his breath rattling unevenly.

"N-not gone, per se…" Gregory stammered, searching for a way out of this mess. "He's simply… uh, not here."

Simon's mouth twitched. Disconcertingly, he was still smiling. His head tilted ever so slightly as he took another step closer, the sourness of his breath hitting Gregory like a wave. "Let me get this straight," he purred, his voice dangerously low, "the guy I'm looking for, the one you *promised* me –" He paused to cough harshly into his fist.

Was it merely Gregory's nerves, or did Simon's face seem unusually flushed?

"–simply got up and left?" Simon continued a moment later, dripping with menace. "I'm disappointed in you, Gregory. I really am. Here I thought you and I had an *understanding*."

Pulse quickening, Gregory scrambled to diffuse the situation. "We do, Simon, *of course* we do! This is all a big misunderstanding. He hasn't left the Hilltop, I'm sure of it. He's *here*, just not… Here. In this room… right now…" he finished lamely.

Simon's expression didn't change, except for the vein thrumming in his forehead. "Is that so?" he growled. "Because, Gregory, what I'm *hearing* is–"

Simon stopped mid-sentence to cough into his fist, violently so. His entire body shuddered with each labored breath as the coughing fit dragged on and on, long enough for the other Saviors to glance at one another, as if silently debating who among them would be brave enough to thump their leader on the back. Gregory stood frozen, unsure whether to feel relieved or terrified by the interruption.

"You alright, boss?" a bald, muscle-bound Savior hesitantly asked.

And then, in the midst of Simon's hacking fit, came an unmistakable sound: a drawn-out, thunderous burst of flatulence. The noise echoed through the room.

The stench hit soon after.

The other Saviors held their tongues, mouths pressed tightly to rein in their laughter. Their gazes darted about the room, careful not to make eye contact with one another.

Simon straightened slowly, spittle hanging from the corner of his mouth. And then, incredibly, a slow smile began to spread across his sweaty, blotchy face. "*Wowza*," he exclaimed, snickering, "I did *NOT* see that coming."

Gregory allowed himself a nervous chuckle. "Better out than in, am I right?"

Simon bared his teeth, grinning broadly. "Well, Gregory, it seems like you and I are both in deep shit right now."

Gregory's chuckle died on his lips. "Ah, w-well, I'm sure we could–"

"Shut the fuck up," Simon snapped, no longer grinning. He surged forward, so close that Gregory struggled not to dry-heave at the overpowering stench of excrement wafting off him.

"Here's what's going to happen next," Simon growled, "you're going to go and gather up your people for me. Every single one, from the grannies to the babies, and even the good folks out there picking wheat, or whatever it is you people do. I want to see them all in the courtyard as fast as you can move them."

He patted Gregory's shoulder condescendingly, rough enough to make Gregory flinch. "And then, after you're done rounding up all these *fine*, hard-working people, you're going to pick five of them out from the crowd. And, Gregory, I'm not going to sugarcoat it: these people are most probably going to die. You're going to pick them out right then and there." Simon's

eyes gleamed with twisted enjoyment as he leaned in, adding in a theatrical whisper, “I want them to know it was you.”

For a moment, Gregory stood there frozen. “I can pick anyone?” he asked, stomach churning.

“To your heart's desire,” Simon purred, his blotchy skin flushed with sick delight.

Hands trembling ever so slightly, Gregory inclined his head in understanding. This was what the call of leadership demanded – making tough choices in the face of impossible circumstances. Once more, the responsibility of safeguarding the Hilltop’s future rested squarely on his shoulders.

“I’ll see it through,” Gregory promised gravely.

“I knew I could count on you.” Simon smirked, thumping Gregory on the back as he made his way toward the exit, his gait slightly off-kilter. Just as he was about to cross the threshold, he paused.

“Bathroom?” he asked casually.

Gregory, momentarily frozen, snapped back to attention. "Oh! Ah, just down the hall and to your left. Can’t miss it."

Simon clicked his tongue and threw Gregory a pair of finger guns before strolling out of the room, an off putting stench lingering in his wake.

A man in a dark overcoat stood in the middle of the crossroads. His figure contrasted sharply with the dusty, barren road. He stared into the distance, unbothered by the rifle holding him in its sights.

“What’cha think?” Maggie asked, shifting uncomfortably in the Wrangler’s driver’s seat. Her discomfort had little to do with the stranger down the road – her lower back was simply killing her.

Sasha gave a little hum. “He’s too clean,” she concluded, peering through the scope of her rifle, her upper body hanging halfway out of the passenger-side window. “Clearly, it’s a trap.”

Maggie sighed and rubbed the small of her back, considering their options. The crossroads was a desolate place. Weeds and wild grasses sprouted from the cracked asphalt, slowly reclaiming the road inch by inch. On one corner stood a dilapidated gas station, the headless remains of some poor soul slumped by the trashed convenience store. Signs declaring *OUT OF GAS*, *EMPTY HERE*, and *COME AT ME PRICKS* flapped loosely in the occasional gust of wind.

Nobody ever came this way. That was the reason she'd picked this specific route and the dang roller coaster of a vehicle. The massive sinkhole they'd passed a few miles back made folks nervous, she reckoned.

This man didn't look nervous. In fact, he seemed utterly indifferent to Maggie and Sasha's presence.

It made her uneasy. Growing up, her daddy had always warned her about crossroads. "*Watch out for shady characters*," he'd say as he kissed her goodnight, his beard tickling her forehead. "*Never trust a quiet crossroads, sweetie*."

Maggie had always taken it for a bit of harmless superstition, but perhaps Hershel Greene had simply been a man ahead of his time.

These days, there was a certain etiquette to meeting new folks on the road. It required caution and a fair amount of restraint. You didn't want to run into the wrong kind of people, but you didn't want to *be* the wrong kind of people, either. Out here in the open, it was easy to let fear blur the line between enemy and friend. Maggie had made a lot of enemies lately – she needed all the friends she could get.

"Keep him in your sights," Maggie instructed, making up her mind.

She shrugged off her jacket, revealing the budding swell of her stomach. At five months along, her belly had popped seemingly overnight. Even if this turned out to be some kind of ploy, Maggie had discovered that most people tended to hold their fire when confronted with a pregnant woman.

Leaning against the open door, Maggie nonchalantly rested her hand on her hip, her holster within easy reach. "You lost?" she called.

"I don't get lost," the man replied after a brief pause, sounding affronted. His voice was a surprisingly husky rumble. "My sense of direction is excellent."

Maggie arched an eyebrow, a faint smile tugging at her lips. "So why are you out here?"

"I'm waiting for someone," the man said, gracing her with the most cursory of glances. "It isn't you."

"Just being neighborly." Normally, she would've left this man in peace – he clearly didn't wish to be bothered – but these were interesting times indeed. "Who are you waiting for? Maybe I've seen them."

"That is none of your concern."

He had yet to acknowledge Sasha's rifle pointing his way. "Sorry about my friend," Maggie offered, keeping her tone light even as her hand inched closer to her holster. "Just a precaution. Lots of shady folk 'round these parts."

"Whatever makes you feel safe," he said dismissively, not bothering to look at either of them. "Is that all, or do you have any more unnecessary questions?"

Sasha gave a little snort. “Who pissed in his cornflakes?” she whispered.

“Why would *anyone* –” the man cut himself off with a sharp intake of breath.

He turned his face to the sky and let out a long sigh. The sunlight highlighted a faint bruise along his sharp cheekbone. He was quite handsome, despite the weariness etched into his features.

“This is pointless,” he said, his voice edged with frustration. “He is not answering my summons.”

“Your summons?” Maggie echoed.

“Crowley doesn't like me very much,” he continued, scowling into the distance. “Which, I assure you, is completely mutual. He is *truly* a wretch. Although I suppose he considers that part of his charm.”

“Sounds like someone I should avoid,” she offered, caught off guard by the man’s unexpected chattiness.

He sighed. “That would be wise.”

“I don’t think he’s one of *them*, Maggie,” Sasha murmured, her voice as soft as a breath. “He’s just another crazy asshole.”

In a flash, his sharp blue gaze fixed on her. “Maggie?” said the stranger, warmth entering his voice for the first time.

Maggie let out a gasp. She felt herself suddenly overcome by an inexplicable sensation, as if she’d been drenched in ice-cold water. It wasn’t a bad feeling... but it was wholly unexpected, throwing her off-guard.

He couldn’t possibly have heard Sasha’s whisper from all the way over there, could he?

“Who are you?” she whispered.

“My name is Castiel,” he said, smiling. “I’m friends with Carl and Enid – they’re very fond of you, especially Enid. They speak of you often.”

Maggie gasped. Ignoring Sasha’s hissed warnings, she rushed to bridge the distance between herself and this inexplicable stranger. “Are they alright?” she asked, a tightness in her throat.

They’d heard the rumors, of course, about the Saviors rescuing Rick’s kids. Dwight's inconvenient death had made it difficult to discern truth from bullshit, but when Maggie sent Jesus to find out what had really happened, he never came back.

Castiel inclined his head. “They’re home.”

Maggie pushed down the lump in her throat. “They’re okay? All of them?”

Something tightened around his eyes. “Yes,” he replied.

Maggie found herself tongue-tied all of a sudden. From this close, Castiel's eyes were impossibly blue. Her instincts screamed at her to stay on her guard, but his presence tugged at her like a gentle ocean current. She shook her head slightly, trying to clear it, but the feeling lingered, settling into her like an unwanted comfort.

There was no reason to trust this stranger, and yet... there was something there... something she couldn’t explain. As his gaze held hers, something in her chest loosened, the tension inside her unraveling in a way that felt almost natural, like a breath she hadn’t realized she’d been holding…

“I can’t believe you did that,” Sasha scolded, rushing to her side. “You can’t just trust any rando who says he knows you.”

“You must be Sasha,” Castiel offered with a polite smile.

(Maggie couldn’t help smiling back at him.)

Sasha’s eyes narrowed, and she turned to face him. “So what did the kids tell you about me?” she demanded, chin jutting.

Castiel hesitated. His gaze flickered away briefly, avoiding direct eye contact.

Sasha’s grip on her rifle tightened. “What?” she pressed, her voice flat.

“I understand there were some, um, entanglements,” Castiel began, clearing his throat. “Of a… romantic nature?” He squinted slightly.

Maggie covered her mouth with her hand, stifling a laugh.

Sasha’s mouth fell open. “Those little gossips!” she gasped. “*That’s* what they had to say about me? *Romantic entanglements*?”

“I completely understand,” Castiel said earnestly, adding with a wistful sigh, “Relationships can be quite complicated.”

Sasha’s eyes narrowed further, but her grip on the rifle relaxed ever so slightly. “Unbelievable.”

“Where are you headed?” Maggie asked, her gaze lingering on the light bruise on his cheekbone. She felt a twinge of incredulity at herself for even noticing something so trivial.

“I need to find a man called Negan,” Castiel said matter-of-factly, and his answer sent a jolt of shock down Maggie’s spine. His gaze flicked toward the north, toward the Saviors’ Sanctuary.

“You what?” Sasha choked.

He tilted his head curiously. “Do you know him?”

“Know him?” Sasha spat, her entire demeanor shifting from guarded to visibly agitated. “Are you kidding me?”

Maggie’s mouth ran dry. “Why are you looking for Negan?” she asked, her voice gentle yet firm. She couldn’t explain what it was about Castiel that drew her. He was undeniably handsome, but this had nothing to do with it. It was something deeper than that, something in her heart. She could fight it, she thought, but… she didn’t want to.

“He took someone from me,” Castiel explained, closing his eyes briefly. “I’m going to get him back.”

(He looked so sad. Why was that so devastating to her?)

Sasha scowled deeply. “And you think Negan will just–”

“Yes,” Castiel answered confidently.

Sasha snorted in disbelief. “It’s a long walk to get where you’re going.”

“Yes.” He sighed in frustration before inexplicably gesturing at his own body. “I’ll never get used to how slow these are.”

Sasha’s mouth twitched and her brow furrowed, clearly unsettled. She shot a quick, questioning look at Maggie.

“We’ll drive you there,” Maggie blurted out, and Sasha’s eyes widened.

“*What?*” Sasha's voice rang out in shock. A nearby flock of birds flew out, startled.

Castiel frowned slightly and inclined his head. The sunlight hit his face just so, cradling a halo behind his head. “That’s very kind of you.”

Sasha twitched and managed a quick, insincere smile before seizing Maggie’s arm. “Excuse us a moment,” she said with forced politeness, dragging Maggie toward the broken-down gas station where they could speak in private.

“What are you doing?” Sasha demanded once they were away from Castiel.

“I don’t know,” Maggie admitted, her voice low. “It’s just – something about him. I feel like we need to help him.” She glanced back at Castiel and gave him a small wave. Bemused, he waved back.

Sasha caught her hand and pressed it down. “Maggie,” she began, trying her hardest to be patient, “he’s a *stranger* who’s asking us to drive him to one of the most dangerous places around–”

“He didn’t ask,” Maggie pointed out. “I offered.”

“He’s *creepy*,” Sasha whispered furiously. “He’s giving me the *weirdest vibes*. And you – you’re acting like a –” She inhaled sharply. “Is this hormones? What – what is going on with

you?”

Maggie frowned, her hand drifting to rest on her belly. “I’m fine,” she insisted. “I can’t explain it, but I need to help him. I have to.”

Sasha pressed her lips into a thin line, clearly unconvinced. “Maggie…”

“The roads are safe,” Maggie bargained. “We know all the Saviors’ lookouts, it’s gonna be fine. Look, we’ll just drop him halfway there–” She caught herself and amended– “*Two-thirds* of the way there and then we’ll leave, I promise. We’ll be back before you know it.”

“He’s going to get himself killed,” Sasha warned quietly. “He’s going to get *us* killed.”

“I could drop you off in Alexandria,” Maggie suggested, her voice softening.

“You’re serious about this, aren’t you?” Sasha asked, her voice tight. “You’re actually going to do this?”

Maggie glanced back in Castiel’s direction and a shiver ran down her spine. “Yes.”

“Fine.” Sasha sighed deeply, her shoulders slumping. She dragged a hand across her forehead. “Let’s just get this over with.”

Chapter End Notes

Back to our irregularly scheduled program, folks! Thank you from the bottom of my heart to anyone reading, offering kudos, leaving reviews - you give me so much encouragement. I am so very grateful to all of you!
Oh, and if you're not following the series tag, I've added a new series oneshot called Hell Hath No Fury for a bit of additional backstory. Check it out!

Hero Complex

Chapter Notes

My sincere apologies to Steven Ogg.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Gasping for breath, Simon pressed his sweaty face against the toilet bowl, gripping it so tightly that the bones in his knuckles cracked. He grudgingly raised his head to spit into the vile mixture of diarrhea and vomit. What the hell did they feed him last night? Someone was going to die for this, he swore.

He reached for the toilet handle, but of course, it didn't flush. No running water, obviously. He glared at the bucket of water beside the toilet. Fuck that, he thought, scowling. Let the idiots running this place deal with the mess.

Simon's knees creaked as he stumbled back to his feet, moving with all the grace of one of the living dead. Christ, the last time he'd felt this sick was after his ex-girlfriend, Mary Lou, had convinced him to try that counterfeit blue meth on their trip to Reno, costing him a damn fortune. God, she was such a bitch. Always whining about something, always dragging him down with her.

Why was he thinking about Mary Lou now?

Simon scowled at his reflection in the ornate mirror above the sink. He looked like a walking quarantine zone and probably smelled worse. His face was drawn, the dark circles under his eyes prominent. Beads of sweat dotted his forehead. Damn it, why did he have to get sick now? This was the worst possible timing.

He couldn't afford another screw-up.

Simon had worked his *ass off* to lock down his spot as Negan's Number Two. Lately, however, it felt like it was all slipping through his fingers. It wasn't just those two slippery bastards he'd been chasing; it was also that new crew Negan had been cozying up with. What did they call themselves again – Hunters? Dumb pricks. They were feeding into Negan's bad habits, just like Simon used to do with Mary Lou's.

Simon wasn't *just* Negan's second; he was also his friend. His best friend, some would say. And as a friend, he didn't begrudge Negan his quirks or little superstitions. But lately, with these new people around – especially that one-legged English freak, Victor – Negan had started pushing things too far.

For Christ's sake, there were two assholes taking out their outposts, some crazy broad calling herself *The Widow* stirring up trouble among their people – and Negan had them running

around exhuming bodies and hunting for fucking crystals and herbs! It pained Simon, truly it did, but the man had lost his damn marbles, becoming a liability to the Saviors and to himself. It was all spiraling out of hand, jeopardizing everything they'd worked so hard to build.

Not on Simon's watch.

First, he'd catch those two idiots and get back in Negan's good graces. Maybe Gregory was right, and that big floofy-haired *bastard* was still inside the Hilltop Colony. If not, it didn't matter. Simon had already dispatched more of his men to secure the area, blocking off any and all access routes. Nobody was coming through without Simon's explicit say so.

Once those two were dealt with, Simon would handle the rest. And if Negan didn't want to play ball – so be it. Simon would take care of him too.

For the sake of the Saviors, of course.

He plastered a wide grin onto his face. "Pucker up, handsome," he told the disheveled man in the mirror. "We've got work to do."

Not long after, Simon stepped into the Hilltop courtyard, wearing a broad smile and a fresh pair of underwear. He paused on the stone steps leading up to the mansion, inhaling the crisp air and feeling surprisingly energized. Anxious faces gazed up at him, their quiet murmurs fading into an uneasy silence.

"Evening, folks. Appreciate you all showing up on such short notice." He clasped his hands and indicated to the crowd. "I'm sure you're all wondering why your esteemed leader asked me to come today."

Simon's smile widened as a few reproachful glares turned toward Gregory, who stood nervously off to the side, wringing his hands. Simon gestured for him to come forward. "Gregory, if you could step up and handle the details?"

Gregory stumbled forward, muttering, "Ah, um, yes, well, let me just – uh – find my reading glasses." He fumbled through his pockets before finally retrieving the glasses from the top of his head. With a sigh, he pulled out a notepad and began flipping through the pages, his hands visibly shaking. The crowd exchanged uneasy glances.

"At your earliest convenience," Simon said, his smile widening into an exaggeratedly polite grin.

Gregory cleared his throat, his voice wavering as he called out names from his notepad. "Bertie, Wesley, Bill, Stephanie, and Rory, could you please step forward?"

A murmur rose from the crowd, but no one moved. Gregory's nervousness quickly gave way to irritation. "Come on, people – step up!"

“Bertie and Wesley took off,” a stout man in the crowd said, his tone dripping with barely concealed disgust. Simon vaguely recognized him from his previous visits to the Hilltop Colony. “And Rory’s dead.”

Gregory’s face went pale. He stammered, eyes darting around, “Dead? What – what happened?”

The man’s expression hardened into one of deep disgust. “Are you serious?”

A young woman whispered urgently, tugging on the man’s arm. “*Andy*.”

“You were right there – you saw it happen!” Andy shook the young woman off, staring at Gregory with incredulous rage. “Those *bastards* killed him!*”*

Annoyance mounting, Simon rolled his eyes and drew his pistol. The gunshot echoed through the courtyard as the crowd erupted into anguished screams, Andy’s body dropping like a sack of rocks. No one fled, however. Not with the Saviors holding a tight perimeter, weapons drawn and ready.

“Look at this mess,” Simon admonished, turning an icy glare on Gregory while keeping his pistol trained on the crowd. “How do you expect to keep this place together if you can’t even keep track of who’s here and who’s not?”

Gregory, trembling and sweating, held up his hands. “I wasn’t informed!” His eyes darted around in panic. “You– you can’t expect me to–”

A sudden, pulsing headache seared through Simon’s head. Clutching at his temple, he gritted his teeth, his vision swimming and the world spinning around him.

“*Shut the fuck up!*” Simon snapped at Gregory, his voice taut with pain. He waved his pistol wildly at the crowd. “Pick five people to come forward. Now!”

“F-five? Don’t you mean four?” Gregory stammered. “Doesn’t Andy count as–”

Eyes watering in pain, Simon bared his teeth. “*Five*,” he growled, before coughing into his shoulder, keeping his gun trained on the crowd.

Nodding, Gregory hurriedly flipped through his notepad, his reading glasses slipping to the tip of his nose. After a few moments of frustrated fumbling, he released a growl and abandoned the notepad entirely. Gregory began to point people out at random. “You, you, you, you, and – ” he scanned the crowd desperately– “you! Step forward, please.” He swallowed hard. “I’m sorry.”

They hesitated, casting nervous glances at one another, but when Simon’s men closed in, their weapons prodding and pressing, they had no choice but to come forward.

“Tammy!” an old man bellowed in rage as his wife was wrenched from his arms. He then dropped to his knees, clutching his bleeding face where the back of a rifle had struck him.

Fired up with adrenaline, Simon grinned through the sharp pain pulsing in his brain. He stepped forward and pressed the muzzle of his pistol between Tammy's brows. The old girl met his gaze with remarkable composure, trembling but resolute, her mouth set in a tight line. Simon's grin widened, feeling a flicker of genuine respect.

"One of you can save Tammy's life," Simon announced, addressing the crowd. He sneered at the other *volunteers* and corrected himself. "And then some." He paused, scanning the sea of anxious faces. "A visitor came by earlier. Someone who doesn't belong. If you know where he is, if you're *hiding* him–"

A commanding voice broke in. "Let her go."

A murmur rose in the crowd as both Saviors and Hilltop residents turned to stare at the man. His arms were raised, yet his posture was defiant, eyes narrowed into a piercing, furious glare. Easily a head taller than everyone else present, this was the very figure who had *haunted* Simon's thoughts for weeks.

How the hell did this slippery bastard manage to slip in unnoticed?

It didn't matter now. A slow smile spread across Simon's face. "Sam, right?" he purred.

The tension was palpable. Sam's jaw was clenched tight, his shoulders squared. "No one's been hiding me," he said firmly, chin raised high. "Let these people go."

Oh, how he'd waited to see this worm *squirm*. Simon licked his lips, a shiver of excitement running down his spine. If only he'd known this guy had such a hero complex – he would've caught the bastard *weeks* ago!

Instead of lowering his pistol, Simon pressed the muzzle more firmly against Tammy's forehead, eliciting a gasp. "Oh, Sammy, we're just getting started." The old girl would have quite a bruise tomorrow, if she managed to survive the night. Simon hadn't quite made up his mind yet.

"This is between us," Sam said, his eyes as cold as ice.

Simon couldn't believe he'd fallen for that bumbling coward act during their first encounter. Oh well, live and learn. He clicked his tongue, and his men sprang into action, patting Sam down for weapons before forcing him to his knees, generous with their violence. This asshole had cost the Saviors too many good men, and their friends were all too eager to repay the debt.

"Where's your friend?" Simon wondered, tilting his head. The other one couldn't be far.

Sam looked – unimpressed. "Killing more of your men, probably," he said with a smirk, flinging his hair back. "Come on, Simon. This is embarrassing. You've got these clowns patting me down like they're auditioning for a role in a bad movie."

The crowd, already tense and nervous, exchanged uneasy glances. The young woman still holding Andy's body was shaking with a mix of anger and horror, her eyes darting between

them.

Simon let out a low chuckle. “Oh, Negan’s going to *love* you.”

The defiant, mildly-amused look on Sam’s face melted away, turning puzzled. “What the hell’s wrong with you?” Sam asked, eyebrows clinched.

Simon paused, taken aback. He frowned when he realized that something was dripping down onto his shirt. He raised a hand to his face, confused.

“You’re bleeding,” Tammy whispered hoarsely.

Simon’s eyes widened in shock as a sharp, burning pain erupted in his mouth. He stumbled backwards, the woman completely forgotten as he cried out in agony, scrabbling at his mouth. “Wha– wha–”

Simon froze, staring into his hand.

He spat out a tooth. *He spat out a tooth.*

Below, the courtyard erupted into violence. Tammy and many of the other townspeople scrambled for cover, taking advantage of the Saviors’ distraction. Many others withdrew their firearms, taking down a few of Simon’s men in quick succession.

But Simon barely registered any of this as he stumbled back into the mansion, narrowly avoiding a hail of bullets.

“Boss…?” one of his men asked fearfully.

He stared at his bloody palm in horror, running his tongue over the gap in his front teeth, his mind reeling.

What the *fuck* was going on?

“Boss, were you bit?”

Furious, Simon turned to his men. They stood back, as if afraid to catch whatever the hell was wrong with him – *Ebola* or *Aids* whatever the *fuck* this was.

“Does it look like it, assholes?” Simon growled, his speech slurred. Blood poured down the front of his shirt. “Do the dead ones lose their *goddamn teeth*?”

They shuffled uncomfortably, protected by the mansion’s walls while the firefight raged outside, where more of his men were likely dying, because Simon and these assholes were *here* instead of *out there* –

“What are you all staring at?” he growled, eyes darting about madly. He snatched up a shotgun, acutely aware of how insane he must look right now. “Go get the bastard before he escapes,” he snarled. “And find me that damn doctor!”

They had some goddamn work to do.

Chapter End Notes

Would you kindly leave a comment? ❤️

I’m All Out of Love

Chapter Notes

PREVIOUSLY: Castiel accidentally mind whammies Jesus (New Dawn, C37). Maggie is a rebel. Dean and Daryl are bonding. Jesus has gone AWOL. Dean is lovesick. Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Grief had a funny way of sneaking up on a person.

One moment, Dean was fine – coasting down an empty post-apocalyptic highway, a bullet hole in his leg and his new pal brooding up the shotgun seat – the next, he was struck by a sense of *longing* so intense it stole the very breath from his lungs.

Before he knew it, a single tear escaped from his eye. He attempted to wipe it away discreetly, but unfortunately his companion had already taken notice.

“You alright?” Daryl asked quietly.

“It's nothing,” Dean said gruffly. He tugged at his nose with a forced casualness. “Don’t worry about it.”

Brow furrowed, Daryl gave a small nod and returned to his silent contemplation of the window. He’d angled his body away, like he was offering Dean a moment of privacy, not making a big deal out of it.

He was a good one, that Daryl. He knew when to leave things well enough alone. Some things were better left unspoken.

Several moments passed as they drove on in silence.

“It just feels like a part of me is missing, you know?” The words tumbled out of Dean in a quick rush. “It’s never gonna be the same,” he felt compelled to share.

“Life’s a bitch,” Daryl mumbled his agreement, rubbing a hand over his jaw as he stared out the window.

Dean released a long, shuddering sigh. “My Baby’s *gone*, man. And the world just keeps on spinning. It ain’t right.” His mouth wobbled, and he paused for a moment to collect himself.

It was always the little things that reminded him – the scent of leather, the wind in his hair, the way the light hit the road just right. Whenever it happened, Dean would find himself plunged into a world of sorrow, feelings and memories he’d worked so hard to suppress clawing their way to the surface.

“You would’ve liked her,” Dean sighed wistfully.

Daryl shot him a strange look, brow furrowing. “...Her?”

“She was so damn beautiful,” Dean said, voice soft with reverence. He stared out at the road ahead, watching the world rush by in a blur of asphalt. The hum of the engine beneath him seemed hollow. “They just don’t make ‘em like that anymore. Well… I guess they don’t make ‘em at all.”

His grip on the steering wheel tightened. “She had these – these *curves*, man… sleek, smooth… every time I put my hands on her, it was like magic. *Real* magic, not that witchy bullcrap. She fit me like a glove, you know? It was like we were made for each other. And the way she purred… *God*, you’d feel it in your bones.”

By now, Daryl was looking downright confused. And was he… *blushing*?

“What?” Dean asked, frowning.

“Ain’t Cas a guy?” Daryl asked hesitantly.

Dean blinked, momentarily thrown. “What? No, not Cas – *Baby*. My car.”

For a moment, Daryl just stared, processing. Then, slowly, he nodded. “No, I get it.” A shrug followed. “Had a bike like that once.”

They spent the next few minutes in awkward silence, counting corpses on the side of the road. Finally, Dean glanced over, clearing his throat. “Why the hell’d you think I was talking about Cas?”

“Just figured. Way you’ve been going,” Daryl mumbled, stealing a glance at Dean. After a beat, he glanced over again, almost shy, like he wasn’t sure if he’d overstepped. “Ain’t none of my business if you are.”

Well, I’d be damned.

A slow smirk tugged at the corner of Dean’s lips. "Well, you're not wrong," he said, oddly touched. "But hey, thanks for the, uh, understanding." He paused, waiting for the line of Daryl’s shoulders to relax before flashing a crooked grin. "Ain’t that big a deal, man. It’s usually the angel thing people get hung up on.”

“The what?” came the puzzled response.

Whatever witty retort Dean was building up to was cut short when a man leaped into the middle of the road, waving them down frantically. Instincts kicked in; Dean swerved sharply, the tires screeching in protest. Meanwhile, the guy quite literally *capoeira’d* himself out of harm’s way, hair flipping like he was in a freaking L’Oreal commercial.

“What the fu–”

Suddenly, Daryl let out a strangled yell and yanked the wheel, wrenching it sharply to the side just as an explosion lit up the rearview mirror. The shockwave sent the car skidding off the road in a chaotic spin of metal and dirt.

Whoosh, went the airbags.

Not cool, went Dean's brain.

There was no time for a concussion, even if his ears were ringing like Cas was whispering sweet-nothings to him in unfiltered Enochian. Groaning, Dean fumbled for his seatbelt. Where the hell was Daryl?

Oh, already outside, yanking Dean's door open. "We need to move!" Daryl growled, his voice barely cutting through the high-pitched buzz in Dean's skull. He grabbed Dean's arm, pulling him out of the car. "*Sonuvabitch's reloadin*g."

"Wait," he grunted, making for the backseat. Only – his duffel bag was *stuck*. It somehow got wedged in tightly in the footrest, and no matter how hard Dean yanked and pulled at the damn thing, it didn't want to budge.

"Dean, leave it!" Daryl shouted, trying to pull him away from the car. Dean fought him off, growling in frustration as he wrestled with the bag.

With a final, exasperated grunt, Dean gave up on freeing the whole duffel. Instead, he fumbled to open it, yanking the zipper wide. His fingers managed to close around Dad's journal, but the compass – *the very thing he needed to find Cas* – slipped from his grasp just as Daryl's arms hooked under his armpits.

"No, wait!" Dean protested, but Daryl was already dragging him away from the car. "Let go, goddammit!"

The force of the second blast sent them both hurling through the air, intense heat scorching their skin. Dean hit the ground hard, face-first into the dirt, the impact driving the very breath from his lungs. Groaning, he held himself up on shaky arms. For several disorienting moments, the world spun around him, obscured by a haze of flames and smoke.

"You alright?" Daryl groaned, looking a little worse for wear himself.

"Peachy keen," Dean grunted, wincing as he rolled to his feet.

Coughing through the acrid smoke, Dean automatically checked himself over. His skin felt singed in places, but there was nothing torn or obviously broken. Nothing he couldn't handle *later*.

Wiping soot from his eyes, he stared at the burning wreckage in dismay. By some miracle he'd managed to keep hold of Dad's journal. Losing that, and the few precious family photos he'd kept tucked inside the worn leather cover… God, it would've killed him. The relief was bittersweet, however.

Dean had lost the compass. *He'd lost the damn compass*.

And shit, the hex bags, too. Oh well, guess they were doing this on hard mode after all.

Tucking Dad's journal into his jacket, Dean drew out his handgun. These bitches went and made this *personal*.

I'm getting that rocket launcher, Dean solemnly vowed.

No one came looking for them, but Dean and Daryl didn't stick around. As they moved through the dense woods, Dean glanced over at Daryl. "Did you get a good look at them?"

"Saw two assholes up on that bridge. At least one of 'em packing heavy." Daryl's clipped voice was all business in the front, side, *and* back. "There's gonna be a few more hiding out of sight, probably."

"We'll wait for sundown," Dean told him.

They circled back through the woods. Dean's leg hurt like a mother, but he pressed on, fueled by adrenaline and sheer spite. Neither one of them even thought about running away, but it was clear to both that they had to keep *moving*. Or, at least, put distance between them and the wreckage. Heavy artillery had a funny way of drawing out the dead.

Actually, Dean was sort of counting on that. Nothing like a few friendly reanimated corpses to flush out the campers from their hidey holes.

"Hear that?" Daryl frowned, holding up his hand.

The distinct crack of gunfire echoed through the woods, bouncing off the trees. It was impossible to tell where it had come from; Could be something, could be nothing. Those days, it was impossible to tell.

Something else rustled ahead. In an instant, Dean's gun was raised and pointed at the new arrival. Except that the figure that emerged from the underbrush wasn't one of the dead, and he probably wasn't one of the assholes who'd tried going all *Waterloo* on their asses. It was the guy who'd tried to *warn* them about it.

"Daryl," the man exclaimed breathlessly, blue eyes wide in surprise. With his greasy hair and unkempt beard, he looked like some kind of hobo Jesus. "You got out."

Seeing as Daryl wasn't going feral on the guy, Dean figured it was safe to lower his weapon. "Friend of yours?" he asked.

Daryl gave a noncommittal grunt. "You look like shit," he told the man.

Hobo Jesus glanced down at himself and sighed. "Yeah, it's been…" he hesitated, dragging a hand down his scruffy beard. Despite his earlier display of athleticism, Hobo Jesus wore the pinched, sunken-eyed look of someone who was in desperate need of a bed, a wash, and a decent meal. "I felt like I needed to get away for a while."

Dean shifted his weight off his injured leg. "Well, appreciate the warning, pal. We wouldn't be here if you hadn't turned up. We owe you one."

“You’re welcome,” Hobo Jesus said, the hint of a smile gracing his lips. He was a handsome fella underneath all that beard and gloom.

“How’d you know it was us?” Daryl wondered, eyes narrowing the usual amount.

Hobo Jesus glanced briefly at Daryl before his eyes dropped to the ground. “I didn’t know it was you, Daryl. I just didn’t want anyone to go out like that.” He sighed, looking away dejectedly before turning to Dean. “I’m Jesus, by the way,” he introduced himself like it didn’t matter.

“Dean Winchester,” he replied automatically. Then paused, blinking. “Hold up, your name’s *actually* Jesus?”

Hobo Jesus – or just Jesus, apparently – managed a sad smile. “Paul Rovia, actually. But you can call me whatever you want. Doesn’t really matter. Nothing feels like it matters anymore.”

While Jesus stared at his feet, Dean shot a look at Daryl. “*What the fuck?*” he mouthed.

Similarly bewildered, Daryl spread his hands out and shrugged.

Dean rolled his eyes, suppressing a sigh. They didn’t have time for this. Whatever existential crisis Jesus was evidently working through had to wait until they were out of the woods – literally. Dean cleared his throat. “So, what’s the word?” He jerked his chin in the direction of the highway. “Anything interesting about the Mad Max extras?”

“Besides their rocket launcher?” Jesus almost managed a smile, but it quickly faded. “The Saviors set up chokepoints all around the Hilltop, just a few hours ago. I don’t know what’s got them all riled up.”

Dean groaned. “Probably my little brother.”

Jesus blinked. “Your little brother?”

Dean opened his mouth to explain, but Daryl beat him to it. “Yeah, they’re riled up ‘cause him and his lil’ brother, they’ve been making little bitches outta them little bitches for *weeks*.”

Jesus’s eyes widened. “You’re *them*?” he breathed. “We’ve been looking for you since…” He shook his head, and for the first time, a genuine smile lit up his face. “Maggie’s been wanting to meet you.”

Daryl stilled. “Is she okay?” he asked quietly.

Jesus hesitated, his gaze dropping to the ground. “Yes,” he said, but his voice was tinged with uncertainty. “Well, she was. I haven’t seen her since I…” He trailed off, turning away with a look of shame.

Dean raised his eyebrows. “Guessing Maggie’s the Widow?” He noticed Daryl’s entire body flinching at the question and frowned, shelving that information for later. “We were just on

our way to this Hilltop of yours to look for my brother. Figured we might get lucky and also run into the wid–" he paused and corrected himself – "I mean, Maggie."

Nodding, Jesus said, "If Daryl vouches for you, Maggie will see you. I can tell you how to find her." He glanced around the woods, his frown deepening. "How many people do you have with you? Do you have enough ammo?"

"It's just me and my brother," Dean replied, rubbing his injured leg. "Oh, and Daryl's been great." He threw his new buddy a thumbs up.

Jesus' brow furrowed in disbelief. "Just the two of you?" He seemed skeptical, but he still asked, "Why?"

"Seemed like the right thing to do."

Jesus hesitated. "You've been killing Saviors because it's the right thing to do?"

"Hey, you know we didn't start this shit, right?" Dean grumbled, rubbing a hand down his face. "Saviors fucked with us, we fucked with them back. We were just passing through. Only reason we stuck around is 'cause my little brother's got a boner for justice." He sighed deeply, weariness weighing heavily on his bones. Maybe over the past few years, killing had become easier as life got harder. Dean probably wasn't any different from anyone else – just better at it.

Something rustled in the underbrush, and immediately all three were on high alert. The source of the noise turned out to be one of the dead, dragging its legless torso along the ground and hissing weakly. Sighing, Jesus picked up a long branch and, with a practiced swing, brought it down hard on the creature's head, flattening it against the ground.

"Fighting with the Saviors' isn't anyone's idea of a good time," Jesus said quietly. "I don't know if I want to fight anymore," he mused, staring at the soiled ground as if it might provide some answers.

Daryl and Dean glanced at one another.

"Well, if you change your mind," Dean said awkwardly. "Thanks again, man. For the, ah… assist."

It was time to go. Those Saviors were likely still holed up on the highway, waiting for their next hapless victim. The fact they hadn't come looking for them probably meant they assumed they'd gotten them along with the car. That suited Dean just fine. The sooner they dealt with this mess, the sooner they could get back on the road.

Before they left, however, Dean still needed to ask the question. "Just one last thing." He cleared his throat. "I've been looking for someone for a really long time. He's about yea high–" Dean gestured with his hand– "Dark hair, blue eyes, intense, kinda grumpy. Thinks trench coats are the height of fashion."

And because this sort of thing was always and always would be a long shot, Dean jokingly added, “And he’s definitely not happy to see you – that’s just the angel blade in his pocket.”

Jesus went oddly still, the color draining from his face.

The little smile on Dean’s face ebbed away. “Jesus,” he said carefully, heart drumming in his chest. He took a step forward. “Do you know the person I’m talking about?”

“You’re looking for Castiel,” Jesus whispered.

Chapter End Notes

Daryl: *popcorn.gif*

Would you kindly leave a comment? ❤️

Freaking Angel Crap

Chapter Notes

PREVIOUSLY:
Negan displays Troubling Hunterlike Behavior. Cas gives Jesus' brain a wedgie. Daryl discovers Destiel. Jesus, clearly unwell, rescues D&D from an ambush and casually name drops. Meanwhile, Dean suspects Sam is at the Hilltop, causing chaos. Sam is, indeed, at the Hilltop, causing chaos.

I haven't slept in 48 hours. Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The vast expanse of Purgatory offered no sanctuary. It was hunt or be hunted; an endless whirlwind of bloodlust. In the darkest depths of the eternal forest, the dead devoured one another. There was no final rest for those lost human souls, damned by their monstrous nature.

But not all monsters came from humankind. Above, in the hidden mountains of Purgatory, shrouded in a perpetual icy fog, the giants roamed.

They were the monsters of old. Leviathans, Behemoths, Hydras, and Dragons – ancient, titanic, eldritch abominations. Giants could not come to the forest, could not join the eternal battle – not in their true gargantuan forms. For even Purgatory had its rules. When these colossal beings descended from their mountain peaks, they were forced to assume humanlike appearances, bound by some unspoken primordial law.

For a bottom dweller to ascend the mountain and face such nightmares was unheard of. For a bottom dweller to *return* was unimaginable. No one had ever attempted it – no one except for Dean Winchester.

He hadn’t found Cas up there, either. But by then, all of Purgatory had learned of *Dean*.

Dean had gotten used to the blank stares, the confusion, the occasional flashes of pity. In his search for Cas, he’d chased more false leads than he cared to count, following rumors and half-truths across desolate highways and backroads, always with the same question on his lips.

This was the first time the answer had been anything other than a resounding *no*.

“You’ve seen him?” Dean’s voice didn’t break, his knees didn’t buckle. Couldn’t afford to. Every nerve in his body was a taut wire, focused on one thing and one thing only. “Where is he? Where’s Cas?”

The man who called himself Jesus stared back at him, blue eyes wide and unblinking. There was something unsettling about the way he held Dean's gaze, as though he wasn't looking at him but at some unfathomable horror beyond. It did nothing to ease the tension coiling around Dean's heart.

A distant series of pops rang out, a volley of shots crackling like a fireworks show far off in the night. Either someone – maybe even Sam – was pulling off a diversion, or the fight out there was getting hairy. But Dean couldn't afford to pay it any mind. Not now. Not when he was so close.

"What's going on? C'mon, just talk to me." When no response came, Dean took a slow, measured step closer, hands open and unthreatening, as if approaching a cornered animal. "Jesus?"

At the sound of his own name, the man gave a full body flinch. His lips were turning white with fear – an encroaching flight response if Dean ever saw one. From the corner of his eye, he noticed Daryl's subtle shift, recognizing, as Dean did, that Jesus was one wrong move away from bolting.

"Easy," said Dean gently. "Just breathe, man. Why don't you start by telling me what's got you so spooked?"

He kept his voice forcibly calm, holding back while every instinct told him to push harder, to demand answers. With Daryl silently standing guard, Dean allowed himself a moment to gather his composure. Whatever had Jesus this rattled was obviously serious business. The fear in his eyes was raw, almost primal.

What sort of trouble did Cas get himself into this time?

"I'm–" Jesus's breaths came in short, hitched bursts. "I'm sorry, I can't. I can't be a part of this. *I'm sorry*."

Dean's mouth went dry. "What do you have to be sorry for?"

Jesus was shaking his head, hands held up as if to ward off a blow. "Please, forget you ever saw me." He began to inch backward. "I can't help you."

"Woah, man, hold up," Daryl intervened, subtly shifting his stance to block Jesus' path. He gestured at Dean. "You don't understand what this means to him. If you know somethin' you better speak up."

Jesus's glossy gaze darted for an escape route, his breathing wild and erratic. "No, no," he whispered, shaking his head. "Leave me out of this."

He turned to flee, but before he could get far, the sharp click of Dean's gun brought him to a skidding halt.

"Don't," Dean warned, gun raised at Jesus' back. There was no way he could chase this guy down – not with his messed-up leg – but there were other ways to stop him. Other ways to

make him talk. “It doesn't have to be like this. Just tell me what you know.”

Please, his mind added desperately.

Jesus raised his hands slowly, his frame trembling. “I saved both of your lives today,” he pointed out, his tone thick with accusation. “Are you really going to shoot me?”

A low growl rumbled in the back of Dean’s throat. “For Cas?” He stepped closer, pressing the gun to the back of Jesus’ head. “I’d do a hell of a lot worse.”

“Just let me go. I don’t want to hurt you,” Jesus said softly, one pale eye peering back at Dean through a curtain of greasy hair.

It was the kind of self-assured boast Dean knew better than to dismiss out of hand, but before he could respond, movements caught his attention. He cursed under his breath as six – no, *seven* – of the undead shuffled into the clearing, mouths opening to let out low, hungry moans at the sight of fresh prey.

It was all the distraction Jesus needed. He twisted under Dean’s arm, delivering a swift kick to his injured leg.

Choking back a yell, Dean staggered back, momentarily blinded by pain. A sharp hiss next to his ear snapped him back to the moment. Growling, he threw his weight into the creature, twisting his head to avoid its snapping teeth.

They hit the ground hard, Dean landing on top. Unwilling to waste a bullet, he pinned the creature in place, his free hand scrabbling across the dirt until his fingers closed around a jagged rock. With a fierce snarl, he lifted it high and brought it down on the creature’s skull. It spasmed beneath him, then went still.

Teeth gritted, Dean uncocked his pistol and drew out his blade, pushing himself to his feet, blood dripping steadily down his injured leg. His muscles screamed in protest, but he ignored the pain, falling into step beside Daryl. Out of the corner of his eye, he caught sight of Jesus slipping away.

“Son of a bitch,” he growled.

In Purgatory, Dean had spent months searching for Cas, but in the end, it was Cas who had found him.

Word traveled fast in that place. For weeks, Dean and Benny had been hearing rumors of chaos unfolding above – not in the mountains of Purgatory, but back in the real world, the one they’d left behind. Rumors of a brand-new apocalypse, of the dead rising across the globe. And yet, somehow, none of those undead monsters had ever found their way into Purgatory. Only whispers of their existence, of the death and destruction that awaited them back home.

Still, Dean had persisted in his hunt. He refused to leave Purgatory – not without Cas.

And then one day, Dean had heard the unmistakable flutter of angel wings. He'd turned to find Cas standing there, sprouting a beard and looking a little worse for wear but steady, serious, and most of all, *sane*.

"We need to talk," Cas had said then.

A lot of water had flowed under the bridge since. Now, back in the real world, surviving both the dead and the living, Dean was once again hunting for his wayward angel. But even after months of searching, he never stopped wondering if, one day, he might simply turn around at the unmistakable flutter of angel wings just behind him.

He was a slippery bastard, that Jesus. Luckily, Daryl turned out to be an excellent tracker.

What a dump, Dean thought, grimacing as he took in the state of the campsite. Even under the cover of darkness, it was a pitiful sight to behold. Garbage littered the clearing, empty liquor bottles scattered about like sad trophies. A one-man tent stood crookedly by a fallen log, a pair of booted feet poking out from its entrance.

Had Dean been in a better mood, he might've found it amusing. Having just spent hours limping after this particular asshole, irritation was about all he could muster. He sank onto the log with a heavy sigh, taking the weight off his bad leg.

The boots jerked and then scrambled back into the tent. After a few moments of awkward shuffling, Jesus poked his head outside, his hair a wild tangle. Even in the dim light of the night sky, the flush in his cheeks was evident. He stared at Dean in dismayed confusion.

"Yo, Jesus," Dean greeted, his voice laced with sarcasm, "what's the good word?"

Jesus's breath hitched. "How did you find me?" he asked, his words slightly slurred.

On cue, Daryl emerged from the shadows, positioning himself over Jesus with a gun aimed at the side of his head. A look of quiet understanding flickered across Jesus's features.

"Got myself an awesome wingman," Dean pointed out with a grin, flashing Daryl a wink.

Daryl let out a huff. "You wasted?" he grunted at Jesus, his expression a mix of disgust and disbelief.

"Not nearly enough," Jesus replied mournfully. He leaned back into the tent and pulled out a bottle of cheap vodka. He gave a mock salute before raising it to his lips.

Equally fed up with the hours they'd wasted, Daryl swatted the bottle from Jesus's grip. It hit the ground with a dull thud, spilling its contents into the dirt. Jesus stared after it dejectedly.

Leaning down, Dean picked up one of the countless empty liquor bottles scattered around the campsite and gave it a cursory sniff. "Took you for more of a wine guy," Dean quipped, not sure if he should be concerned or a little impressed. He raised his eyebrows. "You live like this?"

As it turned out, Jesus was sober enough to feel the sting of shame. He ducked his head, letting his tangled hair shield his face.

“The fuck is wrong with you?” Daryl exploded. “Damn Saviors breathing down our necks, and you’re out here throwing yourself some kinda pity party?” He let out an exasperated breath. “Thought you were better’n this.”

In the distance, rapid bursts of gunfire erupted once more. It had persisted well past sundown, each round shorter and more frantic than the last. If small arms could sound desperate, these certainly did. Dean took a small measure of comfort in knowing that if it really was Sam out there sowing chaos, he at least had the benefit of near invisibility on his side.

“It’s the Hilltop,” Jesus explained dully.

Daryl scoffed. “Don’t you care?”

A sigh escaped the slumped figure. “Why bother? We’re all going to die soon anyway.”

“Boy, you’re a ray of sunshine,” Dean huffed, rubbing at the sore muscle of his strained thigh. “Look, Jesus, *Paul*, whatever your name is – I’m not here to preach. You wanna be left alone, I get it. Hell, I’ve been there. Some days you just don’t feel like clawing your way up from rock bottom. Believe me, there’s nothing I’d love more than to walk away and let you spend the rest of your life living like–” he waved his hand around, taking in the disheveled campsite– “this.”

Some critter scurried inside Jesus’ tent. Dean didn’t feel like it was worth a mention. Leaning forward, he clapped his hands over his knees. “The thing is, *Jesus*… I need answers. So, you can either tell me what I need to know, or we can see how many bones you can live without. I suggest you make the right choice.”

Jesus stared at Dean dully for a few moments, his expression vacant. Then his face scrunched up, drunken confusion giving way to a queasy look. “I’m gonna–” he gasped, leaning to the side to empty his stomach onto the ground.

“That a yes?” Dean called over the sound of Jesus’ retching. Sighing, he shot Daryl with a look. “Some friends you got.”

“He ain’t my friend,” Daryl grunted, shifting away from the splatter.

Holstering his gun, Daryl appeared to assess the situation. It was pretty clear that, despite his earlier antics, Jesus was in no shape to make a break for it now. Spotting a bottle of water behind the tent, Daryl sniffed at its contents and wrinkled his nose before shaking it in front of Jesus’s bowed head.

“Get your shit together,” he ordered gruffly.

Jesus let out a shuddering breath. “Why did you come after me?” he moaned miserably, ignoring the offered help. Letting out an indescribable sound, he dragged both hands through his greasy hair. “I just want to be left alone.”

“What’s with you, man?” Daryl said, his frown deepening. “The hell you runnin’ from?”

A hollow laugh shook Jesus’ slumped shoulders. “It’s not hell I’m running from.”

Dean had just about enough of this. He pushed himself to his feet, shoving the pain to the back of his mind. He yanked Jesus up by his sweaty shirt. “Listen to me, asshole. I don’t give a crap what your deal is. Start talking, or I’ll make you wish it really was *hell* coming after you.” Anger radiating off him like heat, Dean pulled Jesus even closer and snarled, “*Where’s Cas?*”

Jesus dangled from his grip like a ragdoll. He sniffed. “It’s true, isn’t it? It’s all true.” A tear slipped down his nose. “It’s the end.”

“What the hell are you saying?” Dean snapped.

“Castiel… he… he looked at me… he…” Jesus trembled in Dean’s grip, his face a mask of horror. “I think he wanted me to see it.”

The feeling of foreboding bubbled to a boil in Dean’s gut. “See what?” Receiving no response, Dean gave the man a rough shake. “Jesus! What did Cas show you?”

Jesus squeezed his eyes shut, as if trying to block out the memory. “Eternity,” he whispered, his voice barely audible.

For a moment, Dean stared at the man, his mind racing with confusion and apprehension.

Then it all clicked into place. “Hold up – did Cas whammy you?”

Jesus’ eyes fluttered open. “What?”

“I *told him* to stop doing that!” Relieved but also really, really pissed off, Dean let out a long groan. He let go of Jesus’ shirt, smoothing it down with his palm as if to apologize for the actions of his significant *dumbass*.

“Let me guess,” Dean started, acutely aware that Jesus and Daryl were both watching him with mounting bewilderment, “You met him, and suddenly you felt something like a – a force, or some kind of *presence*, am I right? One minute you’re fine, and the next, you’ve got a glimpse into the fifteenth dimension, like Cthulhu’s playing cello with your nervous system, and your whole body just – ” He mimed getting zapped with electricity before snapping his fingers. “Right?”

Jesus stared at him, eyes wide and glossy.

Dean dragged a heavy hand across his face, sighing. “Yeah, man. That’s not eternity. That’s just Cas.”

“The angel,” Jesus said fearfully.

Dean nodded, clapping Jesus on the shoulder. “Exactly! You know, halo, wings, harp – the whole shebang.” He rolled his eyes. “Alright, so maybe he doesn’t have a harp. Actually

drives him nuts when I say that."

There was a long beat. "You're full of shit," Daryl said, brow furrowed.

Dean shrugged. "What did I tell you, Daryl? People get twisted up over the angel thing, especially nowadays. They meet Cas and they start making these connections - like Jesus here did, you know? They meet him and they think it's biblical, or *a sign*, y'know, of the end of times, or whatever. It's not."

They were way past that one, Dean mused but ultimately decided to keep to himself. What was the point of bringing up old Apocalypses, anyway?

"The thing is," Dean continued, "is that people are a lot more *sensitive* these days. They get a whiff of something exotic and they go–" he spun his finger beside his temple. "My brother thinks everybody's just traumatized, but I dunno, I've seen some crazy shit. Like, really crazy shit. There was this cult we ran into, right? They've got – they're walking around in skin suits made out of the dead. *Skin suits*."

Dean let out a huff, frustration seeping from his very bones. "What I'm trying to say is, Jesus, man, you're not crazy, alright? You're not. But you got it all wrong. Just because an angel showed up on your doorstep, doesn't mean it's the end of the world!"

Somewhere in the not-too-far distance, the faint moans and groans of the undead echoed through the night, punctuated by the now near-constant gunfire.

Daryl squinted at him. Jesus' eyebrows rose in disbelief.

"You know what I meant," Dean grunted. He drew a sharp breath through his nose. "For the record, this whole business with the dead - some kind of bioweapon got loose, ain't nothing supernatural about it. Believe me, *we checked*."

"Who *are* you?" Jesus asked, his eyes wide and still holding that silvery sheen of unshed tears. But some color crept back into his cheeks, a flicker of life returning to his gaze.

"Someone who's been looking for a very long time." Dean offered a reassuring smile. "You don't have to be scared of me, and you don't have to be scared of Cas. Sure, he's got the angel mojo, but he's also just a guy." He sighed, almost wistfully. "A really weird guy."

"Then why are you trying to find him?" Jesus couldn't help but wonder.

Dean's lungs refused to fill with air. "Because he's *my* weird guy," he breathed, his whole being brimming with need. "And you're the first person I've met all year who might be able to lead me to him. So, please, man, I am begging you. Help me find him."

Eyes rounding, Jesus' mouth opened with a sharp intake of breath. Then finally – *finally* - he nodded. "They… they brought him to Alexandria."

"What do you mean *brought him?*" Dean growled, surging forward before forcing himself to hold back, to be patient. Then he noticed the sudden shift in Daryl's posture, the flare of his nostrils. "You know the place?" he asked sharply, turning to him.

Daryl grunted in affirmation, his jaw set tight.

“How far is it?”

A shadow passed over Daryl’s face. “’Bout a day’s ride.”

Just a day away. Dean’s heart drummed in his chest as he fixed his gaze on Jesus. “When was this?”

“It was…” Jesus trailed off, glancing around as if just noticing the mess surrounding them. His fingers drifted to his tangled beard. “It must’ve been weeks ago.” He sounded unsure.

Christ, Cas really did a number on this guy, Dean thought, fighting back a surge of frustration. “You’re doing good, man. Just take it slow.“ He took a deep breath himself. “What happened in Alexandria?”

Jesus blinked hard, like he was trying to clear the fog from his mind. “I came to find out if the rumors were true,” he recounted slowly, fingers absentmindedly working to untangle his beard. “The Saviors must’ve brought him in, too. The children were protecting him. I–”

A chill ran down Dean’s spine. The Saviors? What the hell did they have to do with Cas? But before he could process it, Daryl had already grabbed Jesus by the collar, pressing his fist firmly into his throat.

“They’re *alive?*” Daryl demanded, spittle flying from his mouth. “The boy and the baby – the Saviors took ’em?”

Jesus coughed, his fingers gripping Daryl’s fist at his collar. “The Saviors *found* them and brought them back to Alexandria. That’s what the rumors said. It’s… it’s what Maggie sent me to figure out.”

“*And?*” Daryl growled.

Jesus took a shaky breath, but he met Daryl’s gaze steadily. “They’re home.”

Daryl released Jesus’s collar. Shoulders coiled and eyes downcast, he stomped off, attempting to collect himself. Dean frowned, watching his friend with concern. It didn’t take a genius to see that Alexandria wasn’t just any old place – it was Daryl’s home.

Rubbing his neck with a wince, Jesus nevertheless managed a small smile. “You’re welcome!” he called out to Daryl with a cheek Dean didn’t know he possessed.

“What’s any of this got to do with Cas?” Dean asked, his fingers itching to grab hold of something – anything.

The smile faded from Jesus’s face. “He came with the kids,” he said, posture growing defensive as he gauged Dean's reaction, clarifying, “He was unconscious. I was there when he woke up… he was still pretty hurt.”

Dean’s chest flared. “Hurt how?”

“He was bitten,” Jesus admitted, hesitating. “Pretty extensively, as far as I could tell.”

Dean scoffed. “A bite’s nothing for Cas. He could take a hundred bites and it wouldn’t matter. He’s not human.”

Jesus held his hands out in a placating gesture. “That’s everything I know, Dean, I swear.”

Despite this troubling news, Dean couldn’t help but feel a surge of relief. Cas was okay. Cas was *safe*. Well, he was probably still pretty hurt, or he would’ve popped over by now, but if he had enough juice to scramble Jesus’ brains, then he was definitely on the mend. However the full story went, Dean would get it from him soon enough.

But first, he’d kick his ass for putting him through a year of hell. It was a matter of principle.

“When he woke up, I thought maybe he was immune,” Jesus said, shaking his head in disbelief. “Like it was some kind of medical breakthrough. I offered to take him to the Hilltop to see our doctor, but Carl said–”

“Carl?” Dean asked.

Jesus shot a hesitant glance in Daryl’s direction. “One of the missing children.”

Daryl stopped pacing. “Hear that?” he grunted.

Only then did it dawn on Dean that the gunfire from the Hilltop had finally ceased. The realization seemed to hit Jesus too, as a look of devastation and guilt crossed his handsome features.

“What did Carl say?” Dean pressed, trying to keep the conversation on track. The Hilltop could wait; for all he knew, the silence was a good sign.

“What? Oh.” Jesus shook his head, running a hand through his hair. “I think he wanted me to kill someone? No, wait–that was before. I… I never got the message out.”

Dean raised an eyebrow. “Sounds like a nice kid.”

“He's a good kid,” Daryl said in a clipped tone.

Jesus gave a wry smile. “Never met a teenager who wasn’t a little bit of an asshole.”

Daryl scowled but then nodded, relenting. “Carl’s a tough sonuvabitch. Got more guts than brains, sometimes. Like his old man.”

“Rick Grimes,” Jesus explained, nodding. “He’s their leader. Dean, I’m not sure how much you know about our situation, but all our communities have been hit hard by the Saviors.” He turned to Daryl, his tone softening. “The kids are okay physically, but… things are different now. They didn’t expect to find Alexandria under the Saviors’ control. I think that’s been especially rough on Carl.”

“How’d they go missing?” Dean frowned, trying to put the pieces together.

A low growl emanated from the back of Daryl's throat. "Snatched in the middle of the damn night. Didn't find no tracks, no nothing."

Dean frowned, the gears in his mind turning. He'd just seen firsthand how good a tracker Daryl was. If whatever took those kids wasn't natural, it might've had something to do with Cas' disappearance, too. He was starting to get the picture.

"You ever catch a whiff of sulfur while you were out there?" Dean asked, running through the possibilities. If Daryl hadn't found any tracks, maybe they were dealing with something that didn't leave a trail in the usual sense. "Cold spots? Strange marks, symbols, anything like that?"

Daryl's eyes narrowed. "Negan asked about those, too," he said, an uneasy look crossing his face. "Asshole came poking around Alexandria a few months back, asking about rotten eggs, symbols, all kinds of weird shit."

Dean raised an eyebrow, the connection catching him off guard. "It sounds like the Saviors just got a lot more interesting."

"You think he's some kinda monster or something?"

"More like a hunter. It's the sort of thing we'd ask." Dean hummed thoughtfully, scratching his stubbled chin. "Knew a hunter named Negan once. Old friend of my dad's – mentor, really. But that dude's been dead for decades." He shrugged, a faint smile tugging at his lips. "Maybe this guy's his kid or something. These jobs tend to run in the family."

Jesus gave him a thoughtful look. "So you're a monster hunter? Is that what you do?"

"Something like that." Dean shrugged. "If it goes bump in the night, we're usually the ones bumpin' back."

"And that includes the Saviors?"

Dean gave a wry half-smile. "Fair's fair." He raised an eyebrow. "You're fighting back too. There's that Widow of yours."

Daryl flinched hard. "Don't call her that."

The look Jesus gave him was full of sympathy and understanding. "She never blamed you for what happened to Glenn," Jesus said gently. "Not once."

Daryl's expression darkened. "You shut your mouth."

"We were coming for you, you know," Jesus went on, brushing off Daryl's shallow growl. "It was a good plan, too. Should've known you'd manage to find your way out on your own." A small smile flickered on his lips. "Really good to see you, Daryl."

"Okay, so," said Dean, frown deepening as he tried to put the jigsaw puzzle together. "Those kids of yours," he began, shifting his attention to Jesus. "They seemed to know Cas?"

Jesus barked out a quick, dry laugh. “You could say that,” he said, sounding amused. “Those kids guarded him like it was their life’s mission. They chewed up anyone who even *thought* about getting close.”

The thought of Cas surrounded by a bunch of miniature bodyguards gave Dean pause. “Huh.” He tilted his head, eyeing Jesus curiously. “But you got close enough. Guess they didn’t chew *you* up. So, what happened?”

“Castiel woke up,” Jesus said simply before going pale, as if some memory had struck him hard.

“Jesus?” Dean pressed.

After a moment of slow, measured breaths, Jesus spoke, his voice laced with hurt. “He looked at me,” he said softly, shuddering, “and it felt like he was peeling me down to nothing. Like I *was* nothing.” He gave Dean a pleading look. “Why would he do that to me?”

Dean hesitated, momentarily stunned. It didn’t sound like something Cas would *do* – not on purpose, anyway. But a groggy, irritable Cas? Yeah, he could definitely see how that might’ve played out. Cas might’ve gotten a little too heavy-handed with his powers, might’ve forgotten just how delicate human beings were. Probably never even realized.

Dean dragged a hand down his face, struggling to find the right words. Damn it, Cas.

“I’m sorry, Jesus,” he finally offered, sighing. “I really doubt Cas meant to hurt you. Sounds to me like you got caught up in what we professionals like to call *Freaking Angel Crap*.”

“That… somehow sounds right.” Jesus managed a small, tentative smile. “At least now I know I wasn’t just losing my mind. I only – ”

Whatever else Jesus was about to say was drowned out as a sudden, massive explosion erupted from the direction of the Hilltop. A bright fireball shot into the sky, casting a sinister red glow over the night.

“The Hilltop,” Jesus gasped, staring at the red cloud.

Dean grimaced. Now fire – fire was trouble. Unlike gunshots, which tended to echo off in every direction, fire was a bright, unwavering beacon. It would lure the hordes from far and wide, like moths to a flame.

And with Sam possibly right in the middle of it…

A low growl reverberated in his chest. He knew he had a choice to make: go after Sam, who might be in danger, or find Cas, who was hurt but, from the sound of things, safe for now. The choice was simple.

Sam first. Cas later. Then, finish off these Saviors once and for all.

“Lock and load, boys,” Dean said with a grim smile. “We got work to do.”

Chapter End Notes

Would you kindly leave a comment? ❤️

A Siege, A Siege

Chapter Notes

PREVIOUSLY:

Dean teams up with Daryl and Jesus, and without the slightest clue as to why, millions of fanboys suddenly cry out in ecstasy. The trio follow the signs of trouble to the Hilltop, where we last saw Sam skirmishing with Simon and the Saviors. Meanwhile, another trio is heading toward the Sanctuary after Castiel (insane) manages to score a ride with Maggie (insane) and Sasha (the only sane one).

Please enjoy!

Oh, and just a quick note, folks: I had a small accident recently (that is to say, I drove my motorcycle into a ditch). It's cool; my arm and leg broke the fall. As a result, this chapter has mostly been typed with one hand, so please forgive any mistakes.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The journey to the Saviors' stronghold spanned hours. Castiel's escorts had chosen a winding route toward what they called the Sanctuary, preferring to avoid attention. They clearly knew the area well. Castiel was grateful for the women's kindness in offering him transport, though he sensed Sasha's unease in his presence.

It was his fault; a year in captivity had dulled whatever social skills he'd once possessed. Blending in had never been one of his strong suits, but he liked to think he'd been making some progress prior to his confinement.

It was likely that he'd grown too used to the company of children and adolescents. Their developing minds were still open and malleable, their understanding of the universe not yet set in rigid terms. Around them, it was easy to just be himself.

Not quite so with their adult counterparts. They were no less attuned to his presence, their souls reacting to his grace with the same intensity; divine matter responding to divine matter. They felt his presence but their *minds* – their minds so often balked at what they could feel but not *understand*. It was exhausting.

His attempts to ease the tension inside the vehicle had been met with mixed results. Maggie seemed to take genuine pleasure in his company, much to the chagrin of *her* companion, Sasha. The latter remained tense and guarded, knuckles straining on the steering wheel, gaze fixed on the road ahead, although her eyes would occasionally dart to the large rifle wedged awkwardly in the passenger seat between Maggie's knees.

She did not take kindly to his suggestion of placing the rifle beside him in the backseat, where there was ample space.

Maggie shifted in her seat, sighing as she searched for a more comfortable position. She was telling him about the Saviors' compound. "The Sanctuary might look like a heap of rust from afar, but don't let that fool you – Negan's runnin' it like an army base. He trains his folks like soldiers, ranks and all," she said. Outside the car, the landscape transformed into a stretch of abandoned fields. "It's way too large to guard proper, and they know it. You best watch out for booby traps, mines, and things like that."

Castiel looked at her curiously. "You've been there before?"

"No." Maggie turned to meet his gaze. Her smile seemed bitter somehow. "But I've studied it. I know it like the back of my hand."

"Maggie," Sasha rasped in warning, gripping the steering wheel tighter.

Maggie shot Sasha a quick glance before returning her focus to Castiel. "They've been on edge lately, you know," she said, eyebrows drawn. "Means they're more likely to shoot you on sight."

Humming his understanding, Castiel said, "That won't be a problem."

"What's your actual plan?" Sasha's eyes bored into him through the rearview mirror. "Do you really think you can just waltz in there?"

"I don't plan on waltzing," Castiel affirmed. After a pause, he admitted, "I'll assess the situation as I go."

"That's a great idea," Sasha replied, her voice laced with sarcasm.

Castiel knew Sasha had only agreed to escort him toward the Saviors' stronghold out of obligation to Maggie, but it was painfully clear how much she resented being there. Her face seemed permanently set in a deep scowl.

Once, Dean had warned Castiel that if he held a certain expression long enough, his face might get stuck that way. Normally, Castiel trusted Dean's wisdom, but he found this particular claim medically dubious at best and thus refrained from mentioning it to Sasha.

Some time later, as they stopped to refuel the gas tank and stretch their legs, Maggie reached into her backpack and dug out a few paper-wrapped bundles. She handed one to Sasha, who took it with a grateful nod, before offering another to Castiel.

"Here, I figured you might be hungry," Maggie said with a warm smile. "When was the last time you had a sandwich?"

Castiel's brow furrowed. He made no move to take the offered meal from her hand. "Oh, uh…never."

Sasha snorted. "You've never had a sandwich?" she asked in blatant disbelief.

Castiel tilted his head, considering. “Does a burger qualify as a type of sandwich?”

“Yes,” said Sasha.

“*No*,” Maggie said at the same time, rather empathetically. Then she glared at Sasha.

Sasha opened her mouth, but then seemed to think better of it. “I’m not arguing about food with the pregnant lady,” she muttered, shaking her head as she peeled her own sandwich from its wrapper.

Maggie’s mouth twitched. “There’s always a first time,” she said, attempting to hand over the paper-wrapped bundle.

Castiel took a step back, shaking his head politely. “Thank you, but… I don’t eat.”

Nostrils flaring, Sasha let out a strangled sound of frustration before taking a savage bite of her meal, her teeth flashing as she tore into the thick loaves. She shot an exasperated look at Maggie, her irritation clear.

Maggie slowly lowered her hand, her brow furrowed in confusion. Then her stomach gave a loud rumble and she shrugged, taking the sandwich for herself instead. As they lingered by the side of the road, she polished off one sandwich, then another, and finally a third before climbing back into the passenger seat.

It was, overall, a rather *confusing* journey.

Still, he was grateful for the help. He found himself telling the women about his recent travels with the children, sharing stories of endless bickering, of the constant bathroom breaks, and of the jokes that flew right over his head. With quiet pride, he also spoke of the children’s resilience, their ingenuity, and their unwavering loyalty to each other.

He mentioned, with a hint of exasperation, how protective they could be. He was being careful, but he probably shared more than Claire would’ve wanted him to. He mentioned that, too.

“That girl must love you very much,” Maggie hummed, stroking the gentle swell of her belly.

“It’s more than I deserve,” he sighed.

And as the shadows lengthened with the approaching dusk, Maggie began telling him her story. She told him about the Saviors, the ones she fought, and the ones she’d been recruiting to her side despite how guilty and conflicted it made her feel. She spoke about the pedestal she’d somehow found herself on.

Sasha kept hissing at Maggie, urging her to stop talking. She shot furious glares over her shoulder at Castiel, as if blaming him for triggering this exchange. But it wasn’t until Maggie began to recount the night Negan had murdered her husband that Sasha nearly swerved off the road before bringing it to a sudden, screeching halt.

The silence grew heavy, broken only by Sasha's labored breathing, her eyes fixed straight ahead.

Castiel hesitated to speak. "I'm sorry," he told them both, finally.

They spent the remainder of the journey without speaking. The automobile was meant for rough, open terrain, with a skeletal design that let the wind inside. Castiel closed his eyes, feeling the open air, the silence giving him time to reflect further on the prayers of a boy he'd taken under his wing:

//"*You know they're still pissed I helped that guy escape? I knew they'd beat my ass for it, but jeez. Hey Cas, if you ever run into this Daryl guy, tell him my spleen says hi."*//

Scott prayed idly, conversationally, as if he didn't truly believe Castiel could hear him. For the past few weeks, he'd kept up a steady stream of consciousness, narrating his days as he went about his gruesome chores, unaware that he was leading Castiel right to him.

Perhaps it was the act itself that gave him the strength to endure the Saviors' casual cruelty. He would not have to endure it for much longer, Castiel vowed.

Finally, Sasha brought the vehicle to an abrupt stop.

"This is it," she said, her voice taut, shoulders held stiffly. She jerked her chin toward the road. "Keep going that way until you reach the intersection. Follow the signs for the industrial park." Her hands tightened on the steering wheel. "That's where you'll find Negan."

Frowning unhappily, Maggie looked as though she wanted to protest. Sasha's hand snapped up, cutting her off before she could even start. "Don't," Sasha said sharply, chest expanding with the effort of reigning in her anger. "This isn't up for debate. We did what you wanted. Now it's time for us to get the hell out of here. It's done." She turned to Castiel, eyes narrowed. "We're done."

Castiel inclined his head. "Thank you."

He turned to exit the vehicle, but Sasha's terse voice stopped him.

"For what it's worth," she said with a long sigh, staring straight ahead without meeting his gaze, "I hope you don't die out there tonight."

Castiel's mouth curved slightly. "You too, Sasha."

He stepped out of the vehicle and began to follow the indicated path. It was a fairly nondescript road, bordered by thick woods on both sides, the asphalt concealed beneath a layer of fallen leaves and dirt. He didn't get far before he heard Sasha's exasperated exclamation behind him. He turned, frowning, as Maggie rushed after him.

"Wait." Maggie caught his hand, halting him. "Are you sure about this?"

Castiel looked down at their joined hands, puzzled. "Why wouldn't I be?"

Maggie hesitated, but her grip remained surprisingly firm. “We have a safehouse nearby,” she offered. “Why don’t you rest there tonight? You can head out in the morning.”

He gazed at her, head slightly tilted. She had a kind heart, regardless of whatever innate sensitivity had first drawn her to him. “You’re concerned for my safety,” he concluded, oddly touched.

He could sense her longing – for the partner she had lost, for the future she hoped to build in his honor. He felt her anger, and her fear.

So much fear.

Making a snap decision, Castiel placed his hand atop hers. “Your son will be fortunate, Maggie. He will be healthy and strong.” As he spoke, his eyes lit in a faint glow. “Don’t be afraid.”

Silently, Castiel extended his grace, weaving an ancient blessing into his touch. A shield of protection, once granted to future kings and prophets, now placed upon an unborn child, one who might never shape nations, yet was no less deserving of love and protection.

Maggie’s gaze remained locked on his, her breath catching. A tear escaped her eye, slipping down her cheek. For a moment, the world seemed to narrow around them.

As the moment lingered, Castiel began to feel a hint of awkwardness creeping in. Clearing his throat, he withdrew his hand, tucking it into his coat pocket.

“I’ll see you around,” he offered with a slight shuffle and a nod before returning to his path.

As he walked away, he waited until he heard the vehicle veering off before turning his focus fully on the way ahead. Out of respect, he did not listen to the ensuing argument.

Not long now, he thought. The women had brought him within a wing stroke of the Sanctuary, the fortified stronghold that Maggie had described. He’d be there before dawn.

Following the wisps of prayer, Castiel marched on.

The fire could be seen for miles, and by all manner of creatures. Cloaked in blood and viscera, Dean and his companions walked among the dead.

As one, they marched, a sea of gaunt faces, each of them driven by the same mindless instinct, compelled by their twisted biology to seek out signs of life. They followed the call of the flames, shuffling on stiffened limbs or dragging their broken bodies along the ground, entrails leaving slick trails in the dirt.

Daryl called them *walkers*. It was as good a name as any, Dean supposed.

Though slow, traveling among the horde was faster than fighting their way through, especially with Dean’s limp. It was an unsettling feeling, being surrounded by these

creatures, brushing against their cold bodies, smelling their rot through shallow breaths, their masked scents the only thing standing in the way of a bloody feeding frenzy.

Dean glanced down at the gore-smeared bedsheet he'd pulled on over his clothes. It would only hide him for so long. "Starting to see the appeal of a skin-suit," he whispered to Jesus and Daryl.

He was just a touch too loud. One of the dead – a walker with a screwdriver jutting from one of its eyes – twitched and jerked at the sound of his voice. Without breaking his staggered stride, Dean discreetly swept the creature's foot with his walking stick, sending it crashing to the ground. It promptly impaled itself, the screwdriver sinking deep into its skull.

He shrugged at Daryl's glare, mouthing, *sorry*.

Slowly – painstakingly so – the Hilltop Colony came into full view. Dean had seen it once before, back when he and Sam had been scoping out the area. The fortifications sure were something: towering wooden logs that encircled the entire colony, bound and reinforced with thick iron bands. Excellent craftsmanship, Dean had thought then – and thought again now, watching those walls hold back the undead horde.

However, his impression of the Hilltop's mansion was a little different this time around. Though he'd only ever seen it from a distance, towering beyond the walls, he distinctly remembered it being a lot less… on fire.

"It's called *Barrington House*," Jesus whispered, careful not to draw the horde's attention. "It was a state-run safe zone before FEMA left us all to die." The flames' glow flickered in his eyes. "But we kept going. It took us months to build these walls."

"Don't tell me you're a carpenter," Dean whispered back.

Jesus gave him a tired look, like he'd heard that one a thousand times before. Dean rolled his tongue in his mouth, holding back a grin. He couldn't help it. For Christ's sake, the dude looked like he'd just stepped off a Mel Gibson movie set! Was Dean just expected to ignore that? He couldn't do it, he couldn't. He wasn't strong enough. Ever since they'd met Jesus, his brain had been working up a whole freaking arsenal of terrible, *terrible* puns.

In fact, he had one in the chamber right now. But then Daryl shot him another *look* – and ugh, fine. Dean rolled his eyes and, moving slowly – no need to spook the dead – mimed zipping his mouth shut. Better save the zingers for a more… lively crowd.

They'd made it past the edge of the wheat field when, all of a sudden, the ground rumbled beneath their feet. Moments later, the mansion's roof buckled and collapsed with a resounding crash. Ash and embers rained all around, the air shimmering with the intense heat.

Dean spied a glance at Jesus. His devastated expression spoke volumes.

The dead grew more and more agitated as they neared the walls, their movements just a shade quicker, more purposeful. They flocked to the barricades, hands raised and clawing, their

groans blending into an eerie, constant hum. Their numbers were densest near the gates, forming an impenetrable mass of rotting flesh, trampling each other, limbs twisting and snapping in the surge of bodies. The squelching crush of bone and flesh rose high above the roar of the flames.

Even in disguise, there was no way of getting past that mess. Following Jesus' lead, they looked for the second, hidden entrance to the colony. Only that section of the wall was blocked too, they found – obstructed by a frenzied crowd of *walkers*, each of them eagerly reaching for the dead body hanging halfway to the ground, feet dangling just above their fingertips.

The corpse was fresh, not yet turned. The poor guy had somehow managed to strangle himself with his own harness. Dean had to hand it to him – it took real skill to go out *that* stupid. The rope wasn't even that tight; one of the man's arms was still caught inside it, twisted at an awkward angle where he'd tried to wriggle free, his bulging eyes frozen in terror just above his own elbow.

"That's Gregory," Jesus whispered, eyeing the corpse with a slight frown. "He was our leader."

Dean blinked, caught off guard by Jesus' rather blasé reaction. "I'm sorry for your loss," he mumbled insincerely.

They moved further along the settlement's perimeter, searching for a lull in the crowd. The wooden logs forming the walls were bound tightly, but if they could find a gap, they might be able to get a look inside. Finally, Daryl spotted a section where the dead weren't packed as tightly and gestured them forward.

Unfortunately, the walls there were a solid, impenetrable barrier. Just as Dean was about to suggest they move on and search for another spot, he caught Sam's voice drifting faintly from the other side of the wall.

But how to get his attention?

Motioning for the others to cover his back, Dean did the only thing he could think of – he cupped his hands over his mouth and pressed close to the wall. As loudly as he dared, he called out:

"*Sammy!*"

Immediately, Dean craned his head back, looking to see if anybody had caught onto his jig. Luckily, the fire's roaring was loud enough to cover for him. Jesus and Daryl gently redirected the few walkers who'd twitched in his direction, their backs pressed uncomfortably close to his.

And then, a miracle happened:

"How many times have I asked you to stop calling me that?" Sam's exasperated voice drifted from the other side of the wall.

Although he was grinning like an idiot, Dean made sure to inject just the right of *disappointed older brother* into his voice when he whispered back, “Sammy, you dick. Why’d you run out on me?”

There was a short pause. “It’s a long story.”

Surrounded by a horde of the dead and covered in things he didn’t want to think about, Dean glared at his brother through the wood. “No rush or anything.”

“Wait, aren’t you wearing a hex bag?” Sam’s voice had dropped to a tense whisper. He seemed to startle at the fact that Dean wasn’t using *magical* protection.

“Long story,” Dean echoed, sarcastic.

Sam’s frown was practically audible in his hushed voice. “You better not have skimped on the dead guy cologne.”

“Do I ever?”

“I don’t know how to answer that.”

“Oh, that’s first.”

Sam sighed. “Look, Dean, I’m sorry for taking off without telling you. I– I guess I needed to see this place for myself. These people… they built a real community out here, you know?”

A flake of ash tickled Dean’s nose. “So what the hell happened?”

“Do you remember Simon?” Sam waited until Dean grunted an affirmative. “He found out about me being here. He was hurting people, I had to stop him. Things sort of… escalated from there.”

Sighing, Dean pressed his forehead to the wood. A bead of sweat rolled down his neck, the heat thick and suffocating. “You don’t say.”

“It’s under control,” Sam insisted.

“Sam,” Dean exhaled slowly. “The place is on fire.”

“...Not all of it.”

“*Sam*.”

“I know it looks bad,” Sam admitted. “But it’s also far from over. These people deserve a chance to fight for their home. I’m not about to turn my back on them.”

A voice cut in on Sam’s side of the wall, low and urgent. Dean couldn’t make out what was being said, but he could tell Sam was moving away, his familiar voice intermingling with the background hustle.

He felt Daryl's weight shifting at his back. "Won't be long till one of 'em sniffs us out. Herd's getting restless."

"You got ideas? I'm all ears," Dean hissed, glancing over his shoulder.

Jesus seemed to be studying the wall's length. "Maybe," he murmured.

Footsteps approached from the other side of the wall, harried and familiar. Dean's head snapped up. "Sam?" he hissed, just loud enough to carry. "You there?"

"Yeah, I'm here," Sam replied, voice low. "Sorry, I'm here now."

Dean closed his eyes tightly. "Trying to figure out a way in. You're just a foot away, but we might as well be on different planets." Then he frowned. "You still haven't told me what happened with the Saviors."

There was a beat of silence before Sam replied. "Don't worry about the Saviors."

"See, when you put it like that, I actually am starting to get worried about the Saviors," Dean pointed out. "And please don't give me that '*It's under control*' bullcrap. That just tells me it's *not* all under control. What the hell's going on back there?"

Sam hesitated, clearly worried about Dean's reaction. "We've… negotiated a truce."

Dean felt Daryl stiffen. "Come again?" he asked in a tight voice. If the dead weren't at his back, he'd probably be shouting. "How'd you manage that?"

"Simon's crew turned on him," Sam explained simply.

Dean huffed. "That's convenient."

"Tell me about it." The sigh seemed to drag itself out of Sam. "If it makes you feel any better, I'm pretty sure he's been cursed."

Dean frowned. "Cursed how?"

"I'm not really sure, but he's starting to look like Gollum."

Dean's eyebrows rose of their own accord. Admittedly, that… sounded hilarious, but it was the sort of magic neither of them expected to find around here. Negan being a hunter was starting to seem more and more plausible by the minute. "And the rest of the Brady Bunch?" he asked sarcastically. "You figured they just decided they liked you more?"

"Of course not," Sam scoffed. "Believe me, I know what this sounds like. I'm keeping an eye on them, but right now, we've got to handle what's in front of us. We need all the working hands we can get." There was a sharp edge to Sam's voice. "We'll figure out who's double-crossing who *after*."

"After what, Sam?" Dean wondered. "The place is burning to the ground as we speak. You've got half the local undead community knocking on your wall. What's the endgame

here?"

Even as he spoke, he could feel Jesus' sharp gaze boring into the back of his head. He didn't want to be the one to say it, but someone had to. They could fight the Saviors, but the fire had already consumed the Hilltop's mansion, and its perimeter walls were buckling under the weight of a thousand dead claws. The colony was a lost cause.

At this point, all they could do was cover the survivors in putrid blood and gore and hope they make it through the night.

There was a beat. "When did you get so cynical, Dean?"

Dean inhaled sharply. "We're on a mission, Sam. We can't get sidetracked by every–"

"This place is worth saving," Sam interrupted, his voice sharper than before.

"I never say it wasn't."

Sam's tone softened. "Dean, I'm not accusing you of anything. Finding Cas, that's important. But people… they're important, too." He paused. "This past year, the way we've been going… It's been one fight after another, leaving scorched earth behind us. No rest, no breaks… just an endless hunt." He let out a weary sigh. "Don't you ever feel like we've lost sight of who we are?"

There was a low grunt behind Dean's shoulder – Daryl was getting antsy. He wasn't wrong. This was no time for a heart-to-heart.

But Sam… wasn't exactly wrong either, was he? This past year, Dean had pushed everything else aside, narrowing their lives to a single, all-consuming mission: finding Cas. He'd forced Sam away from people who could've used their help.

Their father had always drilled into their heads: you don't get to pick and choose who deserves saving. For all his many faults, John Winchester would've stayed to help these people, because the job – his *duty* – always came first. It wasn't about choice or convenience; it was about doing what was right.

Breathing deeply, Dean asked gruffly, "What's the plan?"

"We're trying to control the fire," Sam said. "We can't stop it, but we can make sure it doesn't spread to the nearby structures. The walls will keep the dead at bay." He sounded confident.

"The walls won't hold forever."

"Not forever, just until morning," Sam insisted. "We'll deal with the horde once we've got daylight on our side. We're preparing for that too."

Dean scoffed. "And what's your plan B?"

Sam paused for a moment before answering, “Saviors drove here with armored trucks. We’ve got those on standby,” he sighed, clearly hoping it wouldn’t come to that. If they needed to make a run for it, saving *everyone* would be next to impossible. “Right now we have them backed up against the walls. If it comes down to it – *if*, because this is our absolute last result – we’ll bring the walls down and save whoever we can. We have the baseboards rigged with explosives.”

“What about camouflage?” Dean asked, gesturing to his own blood-stained cover despite the fact that Sam couldn’t see him.

“We thought of that. But you know how this works – one person freaks out and triggers a feeding frenzy. Next thing you know, the dead attack anything that moves. It’s not ideal, they’ve got young kids here.”

Dean sighed, nodding. “Make sure those trucks are ready, just in case. And Sam? Watch your back. There’s a million ways this could go south.”

“Saving the Hilltop is all that matters,” Jesus murmured, then leaned against Dean’s shoulder to speak directly to his brother. “Sam, there’s a weak spot at the base of the northeast corner, right under the watchtower. If the dead keep pressing at it, that whole section of wall might collapse.”

“Yeah, I know,” Sam said, probably flapping his giant head in agreement, “Earl’s already – uh, wait, who is that?”

“This is Jesus,” Dean deadpanned.

“What, seriously?”

“Not that Jesus.”

Dean was about to ask how many people Sam had working on his side, but something suddenly whooshed past his ear. His jaw dropped when he realized that Jesus, the absolute show-off, had *leaped* at the wall and was in the process of scaling it.

“Uh… this one does parkour.”

“What?”

Dean smirked. “Heads up, Sam. Reinforcements inbound.”

There was a sharp intake of breath from Sam as Jesus dropped down on his side of the wall. Dean listened as they exchanged quick introductions, but then Daryl’s gruff whisper cut in, “You gon’ do that too?”

Dean stifled a laugh. “You first, asshole.” Then, turning back to the wall, he told Sam, “Got my buddy Daryl with me too. He’s cool.” His tone shifted, all business now. “Alright, Sam. It’s your show – what do you need us to do?”

There was a pause, followed by a grunt from the other side. Moments later, two hex bags came sailing over the wall, one of them bouncing off the head of a walker. The creature made a low snuffling sound in response.

“It’s fine,” Sam said quickly, preempting Dean’s protest. “We’ve got our work cut out for us back here. While you’re out there, might as well get started on that horde. Just remember, don’t let them touch you.” He paused. “Uh… does your friend know about magic?”

“We’re good,” Daryl said, already cutting his finger to activate the spell.

Dean blinked, momentarily cross-eyed, before Daryl shoved the second bag into his chest. Without missing a beat, Daryl drove his knife into the nearest walker’s head. The others nearby jolted, glancing around with vacant eyes, but didn’t seem to register that Daryl was looking unusually lively all of a sudden.

Magic was awesome, sometimes.

“You comin’?” Daryl grunted, mid-swipe at another one of the dead, barely pausing as he took it down.

Dean shook himself out of his daze, clutching the hex bag. He paused, patting his side to make sure his dad’s journal was still safely tucked inside his jacket, then shrugged off the blood-soaked shroud, flinging it aside. No point in dragging around dead weight now.

They had a long night ahead of them.

Chapter End Notes

Would you kindly leave a comment? ❤️

Let Me In

Chapter Notes

PREVIOUSLY: Negan murders one of Cas' kids and kidnaps another. Cue the Kill Bill sirens. For reasons, Father Gabe is also taken to the Sanctuary, where he meets Rosita (pssst, series tag, pssst, Hell Hath No Fury) and a friendly Savior tour guide, Laura (yet another interesting female character TWD absolutley wasted).

Strap in, folks. This is a weird one.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

As Castiel came within viewing distance of the sprawling maze of concrete and metal, a new and unexpected obstacle stopped him in his tracks.

Interesting, he thought. He hadn't expected the Sanctuary to be warded.

True to Maggie's warnings, the Saviors' stronghold was indeed heavily fortified, but beyond the barbed wire fences and guard towers lay powerful protective spells, strong enough to keep even the likes of him at bay. Castiel could neither approach it nor see beyond the limits of his vessel's human senses.

While he pondered the problem at hand, a nearby animated corpse – a young woman, once upon a time – took issue with his presence. With a flick of his wrist, he severed the creature's brain stem.

Show-off, he could almost hear Dean saying, a familiar pleased grin on his face. But Castiel quickly pushed the thought aside, knowing better than to let himself indulge in distractions.

The Sanctuary's defenses drummed at the edge of his consciousness, an assortment of spells layered and woven together like misshapen puzzle pieces that didn't quite fit together. Invisible to the human eye, Castiel extended a thread of his grace, seeking out weaknesses or flaws.

Approaching a defensive barrier was not comparable to hitting a brick wall. Not for angels, or any other being who existed across numerous dimensions. In theory, Castiel could push through most wards… until his grace sizzled, crackled, and ultimately fractured, for it would mean he had entered a pocket reality that was fundamentally at odds with his very existence. *Physical* barriers, therefore, were typically considered redundant.

Which was precisely what made these defenses so surprising. Clearly constructed by someone with both the skill and means to execute them, this magic held a discernible shape – a certain curvature he could almost reach out and touch; a dome of protection encircling the entire sprawling compound.

Corporeal enough to attack, perhaps.

Human ingenuity truly was a wonder. These wards seemed to embody that brilliance, crafted by someone both incredibly gifted and yet constrained by human perception – as if their creator simply could not conceive of a shield that wasn't a tangible barrier. Adding *mass* might have strengthened the wards, but it also introduced potential vulnerabilities.

He *had* wondered what had become of that self-proclaimed researcher, Victor. That man had believed himself quite clever, hadn't he? With his odd contraptions and eclectic use of magic, he had pursued Castiel and the children alongside his band of hunters, gleefully shooting Castiel with a bullet forged from the melted remnants of an angel's blade – only to flee when Castiel was forced to expel all the corrupted energy he'd absorbed during his year of captivity.

He truly did not know how he had survived that. Castiel had often pondered whether his vessel – or his body, as he'd come to think of it – would reanimate after his death. He assumed so. After all, it was infected with the same airborne virus that had spread across the world – an earthly weapon untouched by neither Heaven nor Hell.

Any agent of Heaven who might have sensed that implosion would have assumed him lost – if any of them even cared about what was happening down here on Earth. Perhaps that researcher had done him a favor, after all.

And now, it seemed, Victor had found a new home among the Saviors. This certainly explained the strange wards, as well as the Saviors' eagerness to exhume the bodies buried in Alexandria. Castiel didn't know who this *Negan* was, but everything he'd learned suggested that Victor's knowledge and skills could be devastating in his hands.

For peace, both men had to be destroyed. Castiel's grace gently traced the curve of the invisible dome, sensing its layered protections. But first, he needed to find a way to reach them. Brute force was out of the question, but…

He could tap into the prayers of those within. More than that, he could lean into the subsonic frequencies, using the physical distance as a crutch, and turn what was normally a one-way signal into a two-way connection, allowing him to observe and subtly influence what lay inside the compound. As difficult and unpleasant as it was, the technique could provide a way to observe the Sanctuary's defenses from within.

Tuning into Scott's prayer came easily – it was meant for him, after all. He found the boy in an enclosed area, the place he kept referring to as *the pit*, fenced in with the dead. He could feel Scott's exhaustion, his aches and pains, smelled the decay that had infected his every waking moment.

//"I dunno why they think leaving me out here with the dead all night is some kind of punishment. I'd take this over my cell any day. It stinks back there! Smells like… well, I guess it smells like me."//

Through Scott's eyes, Castiel saw the world in fractured images: the restless shuffle of the undead, the scrape of his own weary steps, and his brother's corpse – Jake's remains strung

up to a fence, crude chains cutting into his emaciated arms, gaunt and hollow and –

Castiel withdrew. He took a moment to compose himself.

No, Scott's prayers wouldn't do. But there were others.

Normally, he found it easy to tune them out – unless they were directed at him or particularly loud, prayers were little more than background noise, a broadcast he could switch on and off at will. But now, he could hear them all, each one a distinct thread of thought, from fervent pleas to quiet, desperate whispers, woven together in an endless, unrelenting hum. He began cycling through those prayers, bouncing from one consciousness to another.

//"Take me next, God."//

The man lay on a hard cot, his back pressing uncomfortably into the thin mattress, his muscles aching from the day's labor. Yet, sleep evaded him. He stared up at the ceiling, far above, where rusted walkways shuddered and creaked with every passerby.

Sighing, the man turned to his side, his gaze catching on a dark shape on the wall – a sigil, Castiel thought, but the man's eyesight was too poor to tell. Soon, the man fell into restless sleep.

Castiel moved on to the next person.

//"...san Miguel Arcángel, defiéndenos en la batalla; sé nuestro amparo contra las perversidades y asechanzas del demonio..."//

A young woman offered a hushed, urgent prayer of protection to the Archangel Michael. Castiel wished he could tell her not to bother.

//"Please give me strength not to punch Davey in the face tomorrow."//

The voice flashed in his consciousness, slight and fleeting.

//"Bismillah."//

A young man quietly thanked Allah for his meal, and as he bit into his dinner of canned beans for the third night in a row, his soul silently longed for pizza.

//"Lord, forgive me for what I did today. I didn't mean to. I swear, I didn't mean to."//

The woman sat on the toilet, pants and underwear bunched at her ankles. Her legs had long gone numb, but she refused to leave the stall, her refuge. Her prayer was crystal clear, even if her vision was blurry. Sensitive, this woman – attuned, like someone with magic in their distant ancestry. Castiel could glimpse the faint shimmer of magic around her, could almost feel the curvature of the protective spells above. Almost.

Concentrating, Castiel attempted to draw upon the woman's untapped potential, but the energy was too volatile. His grace collided with the warding, ricocheting back. The light fixture above the woman's head exploded.

She screamed.

He withdrew, then kept going on.

//"If you're up there, God, or whoever the hell's listening, I need a favor. Before you send my ass down to hell, just let me have one thing: give me the chance to tell that ASSHOLE Negan to go fuck himself. Amen."//

The man trudged along the courtyard, ignoring his companion's chatter. His knees ached, and his stomach churned in pain, his latest meal disagreeing with him. He was supposed to be on patrol, but nothing ever moved here at this hour, and this was his eighth night on guard duty in a row. In his mind, he pictured landing a fist square on Negan's face, breaking that toothy grin once and for all.

The image was so vivid that Castiel caught a glimpse of it himself – a flickering, disjointed vision of a broad, taunting smile. It lingered for a heartbeat, then faded as if it had never been there at all.

Castiel continued to drift from prayer to prayer, fragments of human lives brushing against his consciousness in fleeting pulses. Soft pleas from the weary, prayers for safety, and desperate promises flowed past him. Some were instinctive, the human mind unconsciously releasing energy into the ether, unnoticed by all except those, like Castiel, who could interpret them. As Enid often argued, it wasn't entirely unlike telepathy.

Not all of them were verbal. As Castiel navigated the stream of frequencies, he found the priest from Alexandria – the one who had once urged him to stand aside in the face of the Saviors' savagery. Father Gabriel.

The priest was exhausted and wary, his heart skipping a beat as a man – yes, Victor, just as Castiel had suspected – dragged a knife across his palm.

Interesting.

At last, Castiel anchored himself back in his body, bringing his fingers to his temples to massage away the lingering disorientation. None of the prayers had been particularly revealing, but they had offered just enough fragments to piece together a clearer understanding of the situation.

Turning his attention back to the wards, he studied the intricate structure encasing the Saviors' compound – layers of magic, both old and new, crafted and flaunted by a brilliant mind. But therein lay the problem with savants: their pride in their intellect often blinded them to their own mistakes.

The dome encapsulated the compound entirely, with layers upon layers of magic sealing everything within. But it remained a physical barrier, not a metaphysical one, and angels were not confined to a single plane of existence. He could extend his influence beyond the defenses, attacking without ever stepping inside the gates. Moreover, anything Castiel would unleash upon the Sanctuary would be trapped inside, amplifying and reverberating within the barrier like a magical greenhouse effect.

The prayers were one conduit, yes, but there were others. Castiel was old, very old. He had once laid siege to Hell itself. What was a single human settlement in comparison?

He was so absorbed in his contemplations that he nearly missed the low hum of the approaching vehicle. For a moment, he wondered if Sasha and Maggie had returned, but no, the roll of tires on gravel sounded distinctly different. Without turning, he shifted his attention, focusing on the vehicle and the voices of its occupants.

“Woah, check this out,” Castiel overheard a rough voice say as the vehicle slowed to a crawl.

“Who the fuck is that?”

“It’s just a dead one,” another replied in a murmur, sounding half-asleep.

“He’s alive,” a woman chimed in, her voice low and guarded.

A pause hung in the air before the first voice spoke again, more wary this time. “Well, he’s creepy as shit.”

The woman seemed to scoff. “Are you always this jumpy, Jeff?”

“Eat shit, Mara,” Jeff huffed. The sound of cracking joints followed, along with a long sigh. “Let’s just get this over with. I want my four hours of shuteye before the missus starts bitching.”

Another voice cut in, amused. “I don’t know what that woman sees in you.”

“I’m a catch,” Jeff deadpanned. “Alright, listen up. I'm gonna go see what this guy wants and then–” he chuckled– “I’mma blow his brains out like a fucking piñata.”

“Are you sure about this? Negan might want to talk to him,” a new voice chimed in.

“Negan isn’t here,” Jeff shot back. “And it’s too goddamn late for prisoners.”

There was a brief pause. “*We’re* Negan,” the woman said, her warning clear.

“Exactly,” Jeff replied. “We make the decisions. Right now, I’m deciding we don’t need another mouth to feed. Let’s keep it simple.”

They brought the car to a complete stop behind Castiel, and if he were human, the headlights would’ve likely blinded him. He glanced over his shoulder to find a large van, similar to the one he and the children had used during the initial leg of their journey. Seven figures emerged – six men and one woman – each holding their weapons with practiced ease, their expressions and postures radiating a clear menace.

It was, as Dean might have put it, adorable.

The one he presumed was Jeff strode forward, a shotgun perched on his shoulder. “You lost?” he called.

“No,” Castiel replied evenly, returning his attention to the sprawling compound ahead. “I’m exactly where I need to be.”

Jeff chuckled. “Well, isn’t that nice.” The unmistakable sound of a shotgun being pumped echoed behind Castiel as the man shifted his stance. “Turn around. Let’s see your hands.”

Castiel remained perfectly still, paying these strangers little mind. The Sanctuary’s defenses shimmered with power, nearly visible in the night’s sky. He wondered if the Saviors could feel it on some level, or if their senses were too dull to perceive what was right in front of them.

“Hey! You deaf, asshole?” Jeff snapped, irritation flaring. He stepped closer, the barrel of his shotgun aimed at the back of Castiel’s head. “I said turn around or–”

“You’ll ‘blow my brains out like a fucking piñata’?” Castiel quoted with a raised eyebrow, looking over his shoulder.

The ones behind Jeff frowned, glancing at one another. Jeff seemed taken aback but quickly recovered, his eyes narrowing, the shotgun held steady. “Yeah, that’s right.”

“Crazy how you caught that,” Mara spoke up. She was a slight woman, but she held herself with a quiet confidence, shoulders squared and eyes sharp. She watched Castiel keenly, as if trying to decipher a puzzle. “Why are you out here?” she asked, ignoring the ugly glare Jeff shot her way.

“I’ve come for Negan,” Castiel replied.

Jeff grinned sharply. “Well, you found him,” he chuckled, his crooked teeth glinting in the moonlight. “I’m Negan, asshole.”

Slowly, Castiel turned to face the group in full. “No, you’re not,” he said, “but you can deliver my message.”

The man’s crooked grin faltered, but anger soon took over his fear. He aimed his shotgun. “Yeah? And just who the fuck are you?”

“It would be easier if I showed you,” Castiel offered.

Father Gabriel never imagined he would ever end up in the heart of the Saviors’ stronghold, standing over a sprawling courtyard while calmly stirring honey into his steaming cup of tea.

It was quite shocking, really, just how much freedom he’d been granted. When the Saviors had first grabbed him, Gabriel assumed he would end up in a dark cell, subjected to the same abuses Daryl had suffered. Instead, he was treated more like a guest. Constantly under watch, yes, but still a guest nonetheless.

Perhaps they thought that, being a priest, Gabriel was harmless – an easy mark for manipulation. Perhaps they assumed he wouldn’t memorize the layout of each massive hall or time exactly how long it took the night patrol to complete each round.

Ten minutes, in fact.

As the guards passed beneath the concrete platform, Gabriel raised the cup to his lips, gently blowing, sending steam curling into the cool night air. He stole a superstitious glance at his watch, noting the time. Ten minutes – the perfect span for his tea to cool, he mused. Lowering the cup, he patiently waited for the guards' next rotation.

It was almost peaceful out here in the dead of night. The air was crisp and cool above the lingering stench of death rising from the walker pens across the yard. Gabriel knew he should be resting; he had another long day ahead of him – reciting verses, casting blessings, and reading transliterated passages in languages he could not speak. Yet his mind was restless, constantly flashing back to that harrowing scene in Negan's torture chamber.

Gabriel took a deep breath, trying to purge the scent of sulfur from his mind. He kept replaying those moments in his thoughts – the demon's blackened eyes, the steam rising from its flesh, the sound it made as it died. He'd *felt* its evil.

Or perhaps, the evil had been there to begin with, wearing a handsome face and a boyish, toothy grin. Was he wise to align himself with Negan, or was he merely placing one evil over another?

"Heavenly Father," he prayed softly, raising his face to the clear night sky and closing his eyes. "Grant me strength to resist temptation and the wisdom to discern the truth from lies."

A flash of light pierced through his closed eyelids, making Gabriel's heart skip a beat. His eyes snapped open just as another streak of lightning split the distant sky. His lips curved into a faint smile. "Thank you," he whispered to the clear, star-dotted heavens. He didn't yet understand the meaning of the sign, but he was certain that God would show him the way.

The guards reappeared, right on schedule. *Ten minutes exactly*, he noted. Smiling, Gabriel raised the cup to his lips.

Only to let it slip from his grasp with a startled yelp. The cup shattered at his feet, hot liquid hissing as it met the cold concrete. He stared down, dumbfounded, his tongue still throbbing from the searing heat.

How…?

"Alright there, Pops?" a woman's voice rang out.

He turned to see Laura standing in the doorway, her usual sour expression in place. Tonight, though, dark shadows circled her eyes. They hadn't exchanged a word since Negan's… display. He wondered if she too was haunted by what they had witnessed.

Hand covering his burning mouth, Gabriel gave a quick nod. "My mistake," he mumbled, gesturing to the shattered glass, his words slurred by his throbbing tongue. He swallowed hard, pushing a smile through the pain. Perhaps he could turn this into an opportunity. "Couldn't sleep either?" he asked, his smile warm despite the sting. "You know, if you ever wish to talk…"

Laura cut him off with a snort. “Save it.” She glanced at his bandaged hand, brows furrowing. “What happened there?”

Gabriel’s thumb brushed over the white bandage. “Nothing serious,” he responded.

“This place is a minefield,” Laura said, motioning toward a rusted window frame. “When’s the last time you had a tetanus shot? More than five years?”

“Are you a doctor?” Gabriel asked, his tone lightly teasing, hoping to spark some kind of connection. It never hurt to have an ally.

“My dad was,” she said with a shrug. “I was a med student.” She shrugged again, as if it didn’t matter.

Gabriel raised his eyebrows, his gaze lingering on the young woman’s prominent neck tattoo and glinting nose ring. It was hard to picture her in a white coat, stethoscope around her neck. “I’m sure you would’ve been an excellent doctor,” he offered, forcing a smile.

Laura gave him a long, serious look. “Fuck, yeah.”

His smile grew sincere. “Why don’t you apprentice under the Sanctuary’s doctor, then? It seems like a good fit.”

A hint of amusement flickered in Laura’s eyes. “I’ve already got a job,” she replied.

Gabriel frowned, shifting on his feet. The faint clinking of glass shards pulled him back to reality. Shaking his head, he crouched down to gather the shattered remnants of his tea cup.

“Weren’t you listening?” Laura snapped, startling him enough to make him drop a piece of glass.

“What?” He blinked up at her.

“Leave that shit alone,” she said sternly. “You don’t do this kind of work.” Leaning back inside the doorway, Laura snapped her fingers at someone unseen. “You. Come here.”

Hurried footsteps echoed down the hall, and a young man appeared in the doorway. He looked to be in his late teens or early twenties, sporting a thin, scruffy beard and weary eyes. Taking in the scene, he didn’t need to be told what to do. Without hesitation, he pulled on a pair of thick work gloves, knelt down, and began gathering the shattered pieces.

“This isn’t necessary,” Gabriel protested weakly.

“Don’t worry about it, Father,” the young man replied calmly, picking up the last pieces before standing. With his back turned to Laura, he shot Gabriel a meaningful look. “I’m Alden. If you ever need anything, just ask for me.”

Gabriel blinked, momentarily taken aback. “Thank you, Alden. I’ll keep that in mind.”

“You know, Doc’s got a younger brother,” Laura drawled, casually leaning against the doorframe as the young man’s footsteps faded. A man screamed somewhere inside the Sanctuary, but Laura paid it no mind. She studied her nails as she spoke, “He lives in another community. Negan’ll bring him in sooner or later.”

Gabriel frowned slightly. “I’m not sure I follow.”

“You were wondering why I’m not trying to become a doctor, right? It’s simple – Doc’s expendable. Negan can replace him anytime he wants. Me? I’ve made sure I’m not that easy to replace.” She paused, a smirk playing on her lips. “And neither are you.”

“I see,” he murmured, his voice carefully neutral.

Laura shifted her stance, her expression softening just a fraction. “Hey,” she said, almost reluctantly. “Do you think you could talk to Rosita?” There was a hint of genuine concern in her voice, a rare crack in her otherwise tough exterior. “She’s been a bit off since the… incident.”

“The incident?” Gabriel repeated.

Laura gave him a look. “The demon lady?” She huffed a sigh. “Is it really any weirder than the lives we’re already living?”

Gabriel managed a weak smile. “I suppose not.” But then he frowned. “But I haven’t even seen Rosita since–”

Laura pointed toward the courtyard. The Sanctuary was never truly quiet, even in the dead of night. The undead, confined within the gated section of the yard, never rested. In the darkness, it was easy to overlook the solitary figure standing motionless by the fence, cloaked in shadow. Gabriel’s heart sank as he realized his friend had been right in front of him this whole time.

Taking a deep breath, Gabriel made his way toward Rosita.

He found her by the walker pen. Her long hair hung loose, cascading down her back in dark rivers. She seemed lost in thought, her expression contemplative as she stared into the vacant eyes of a trapped walker, their faces mere inches apart. If it weren’t for the chain link fence separating them, the walker would have been gnawing on Rosita’s face instead of cold metal.

“You shouldn’t be here,” she told him without taking her eyes off the walker.

“Neither should you,” Gabriel replied, recalling that their last conversation had played out exactly the same way.

“I think I’m exactly where I need to be.” Lifting her chin, she motioned at the walker. “Do you think this is God’s way of punishing us?” Rosita asked, her tone matter-of-fact.

“Perhaps He is testing us?” he suggested.

Rosita hummed in thought. “I think I have a lot to learn.”

Before he could inquire further, Gabriel's attention was drawn to movement beyond the chain link fence. What he had initially thought was just another dead body suddenly shifted with a low groan. It was the boy, he realized with a start – the one he'd met on the day of his arrival. The one who had been placed inside the walker pen as punishment.

"Hello?" Gabriel called out to him.

He felt Laura tense at his back. The boy jumped, startled to be addressed. Inside the pen, the dead surged forward in their restraints, their vigor renewed by the sound of Gabriel's voice. The boy didn't pay them any mind, just turned his attention on Gabriel, expression guarded. Even in the dim light of night, his face was visibly bruised.

"It's all right," Gabriel said in what he hoped was a soothing tone of voice. He rooted inside his pocket, retrieving a candy bar he'd been saving up for later. "Would you like something to eat?" he asked, holding the candy bar like an offering.

The boy approached slowly, eyeing him skeptically. Behind him, Laura hissed urgently, "You can't do that. That one is off limits."

Gabriel glanced over his shoulder at Laura. "Actually, I think I can do whatever I want," he said, offering her a pleasant smile. "Unless you happen to have another priest on standby?"

A slow smirk crept onto Laura's lips. "Well played."

The boy approached cautiously, his eyes darting between Gabriel and the candy bar he had slipped through the fence. It fell to the ground, coming to rest at the feet of a snarling walker strung up against the chain link. It wasn't until Laura rolled her eyes and tossed her own water bottle over the fence that the boy finally relaxed. In an instant, he snatched both the bottle and the candy bar, inhaling them before any of them could blink.

"Why are they keeping you locked up with the walkers?" Gabriel asked softly, taking in the boy's gaunt frame.

"He got Daryl out," Rosita answered for him, an appreciative smile curving her lips.

Gabriel's breath hitched. "Daryl is alive?" At Rosita's questioning look, he glanced over at Laura, knowing better than to talk freely in front of her. He chose his next words carefully. "We were told he passed away."

"Hey, you just called them *walkers*," the teenager suddenly said, his voice rough from disuse. He reached for the chain link fence, standing uncomfortably close to the strung-up walker hanging from it. "Are you from Alexandria?"

Brow furrowed, Gabriel slowly nodded. "We are."

The boy bit his lip, anxiety etched across his features. "Are my friends okay?"

"Your friends?"

“Carl and the others,” the boy replied quickly, pushing back his dirty hair with an equally dirty hand. “What about Cas, is he–”

They were interrupted by a sudden loud commotion from the direction of the gates. Gabriel turned to see what was happening, blinking in surprise as he took in the scene. Out of nowhere, a thick fog had begun to form, an intensely white cloud that rolled down from the sky. It was the middle of the night, hours until dawn, yet the fog glowed brightly, as if it had descended directly from the heavens, carrying a hint of sunlight with it.

The air smelled like ozone. It was a sharp, electric scent.

Suddenly, something crashed into the gates with a loud thud, causing all of them to jump. The patrolling guards, who had come running at the commotion, halted beside them, their expressions apprehensive. The fog was becoming thicker by the minute, engulfing the Sanctuary like a shroud. The second pair of guards stationed at the gates hesitated, looking around wildly as another knock echoed through the night, reverberating off the metal.

“What the hell is that?” Laura demanded, before turning to the nearest guard. “Get Negan. Go!”

There were faint voices coming from behind the gates. Swallowing thickly, Gabriel began to approach. The guards’ wide eyes turned to him for guidance, their faces partially hidden behind the swirling mist. It was clear to all of them that this was no ordinary fog; they could feel it in their bones.

“Open the gates,” Gabriel said, the command slipping from his lips. His heart pounded in his chest. With no small amount of hesitation, the guards moved to obey.

The gates swung open.

Gabriel thought they were walkers at first. They moved slowly, their feet scuffing against the ground, their forms barely visible through the thick fog. But then, they spoke.

“He’s coming for you,” the young woman whispered, her sightless eyes somehow fixed on him with a terrifying intensity. If she had the capacity to cry, he was certain she would have been sobbing. “He’s coming for you.”

“Mara?” he heard Laura whisper.

“He’s coming for you.” The woman clutched at Gabriel’s sleeves, her fingernails digging painfully into his forearms. “He’s coming for you,” she kept chanting, her voice rising in urgency. With her face so close to his, he could feel the heat radiating from her empty, charred eye sockets. The scent of burning flesh filled his nose, overwhelming his senses. “He’s coming for you. He’s coming for you.”

“Who’s coming?” Gabriel’s own voice came as a terrified whisper. “Who did this to you?”

But there were no answers, only the same echoed warnings. The woman’s voice intermingled with the others in a disjointed chorus. “He’s coming for you,” they chanted in their wrecked

voices, each of them bearing the same sighless gaze, faces streaked with black soot, steam rising from the charred, gaping wounds where their eyes used to be.

For a moment, he thought of Carl and how he must have looked after his injury, but no – this was far worse. Gabriel couldn't shake the feeling that he was staring into the depths of Hell itself.

The temperature seemed to drop around him, as if the fog itself carried an otherworldly chill. Suddenly, someone shoved past him, causing him to stumble and lose his balance. The young woman slipped from his arms. He could still hear her voice chanting in his ears. Gabriel scrambled to regain his footing, glancing around wildly.

Through the chaos, Gabriel caught the faint sound of laughter. A carefree, disconcerting sound that sent a shiver down his spine. It was coming from the boy in the cage.

"What the hell are you laughing at?" someone demanded roughly. The boy only laughed harder.

People were pouring into the yard now, stumbling in the unnatural fog. Shouts filled the air, urgent and panicked.

And above it all, the same urgent chanting:

"He's coming for you."

"He's coming for you."

"He's coming for you."

Chapter End Notes

Would you kindly leave a comment? ❤️

Traitor Tots

Chapter Notes

> PREVIOUSLY: Claire survives a bite and we learn that there are perks to being a former angel vessel. Cas boops Carl and then leaves Alexandria under suspicious circumstances. Sam, determined to save the Hilltop, makes some questionable decisions. I'm very tired. I'll probably update these notes later.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The night Castiel had left Alexandria, Carl had snuck back to his bedroom and locked the door behind him. He spent the next few hours staring at his reflection in the mirror, waiting for a knock on the door that never came.

He couldn't remember crawling into bed, but he woke up sometime around noon, blinking at the sunlight streaming through his window. He rubbed his eyes – both of them – and wondered how he'd even start explaining this one to his family. Only, by the time he finally mustered up the courage to head downstairs, a fresh bandage over his perfectly normal face, Rick and Michonne were nowhere to be seen.

Instead, he found Olivia folding laundry in the living room, watching over Judith as she played with her stuffed dolls.

"What are *you* doing here?" Carl blurted out, realizing a moment too late how rude he sounded.

Olivia gave him a reproachful look. "Good morning," she said pointedly, adding a folded t-shirt to the neat pile beside her. "Rick and Michonne had to run an urgent errand. They asked me to look after things while they're gone."

Frowning felt odd without the tightness tugging at his face. "What sort of errand?"

"You'll have to ask your dad when he gets back," Olivia replied dismissively, reaching for another item from the laundry basket.

"Why are you… doing that?" he asked, feeling his face heat as she folded his underwear.

She shrugged, barely looking up. "I don't mind. Keeps me busy."

He shifted on his feet. "Did they say when they'll be back?"

"No," Olivia answered sharply.

It was like trying to get answers from a brick wall. Carl's gaze drifted to Judith, managing a small smile as she proudly held up one of her favorite toys – an ugly doll with fuzzy pigtails and a goofy grin – but his mind was racing, still trying to make sense of it all. What could be urgent enough to make Rick and Michonne leave so suddenly? Without even telling him?

Shaking his head, Carl turned for the front door.

Olivia looked up suddenly. "Where do you think you're going?"

Carl was too confused to take offense at her tone. "Out?" he replied, hand hovering on the doorknob.

Olivia shot him a suspicious look, adjusting her glasses with the tip of her finger. It suddenly dawned on him that she wasn't there just to keep an eye on *Judith*.

Fuming, Carl made sure the door slammed behind him as he stormed out to find his friends.

Over the next few days, Carl couldn't decide if he was the town pariah or just the most talked-about person in Alexandria. That day in the cemetery, they'd all witnessed Rick accuse Castiel of having ties to the Saviors. And they'd all seen Carl jump between them, hand on his knife, ready to defend his friend against his own father.

To make matters worse, Bruce, Francine and Anna seemed to believe Carl was somehow responsible for them blacking out on the street – as if Castiel knocking them out on his way out was somehow Carl's fault!

According to the gossips – whose hushed conversations Carl kept catching the tail ends of – the current consensus was that Castiel was some kind of Savior bigshot, and his injuries and miraculous recovery were all part of some elaborate game. Apparently, Carl and his friends were either brainwashed victims or willing collaborators. Or possibly both.

Carl seriously considered revealing his new eyeball just to watch them choke, but he knew he had to talk to his family first. It was tempting, though.

"I can't pretend I'm half-blind for the rest of my life," Carl quietly complained to his friends one evening, pointing to his face. He wanted to complain *loudly*, but Olivia kept finding reasons to walk past his bedroom door. "It's not fair."

"Everybody's gonna think you've been replaced by a clone," Mikey suggested dryly, tapping his knee to the tune of the Copacabana. His dad had confiscated his record player. "An *evil* clone."

Claire, lounging moodily on Carl's beanbag, sighed heavily. "Go ahead and do whatever you think is best. Just keep in mind, they'll be weird about it no matter what."

"Honestly, Claire? I'm surprised," he admitted, "I never expected you to be so–" *mature*, he almost said, but caught himself just in time– "*reasonable* about this. What happened to Plan A?"

Plan A had been Claire's way of saying: shut up about the supernatural. It was the one thing she'd been drilling into them ever since they woke up on that boat in New Jersey.

"Don't be stupid," Claire said, propping herself up on her elbows and giving him a knowing look. "I'm not going to make you wear an eyepatch for life. I'm, you know, happy for you." She shrugged and settled back down on the beanbag, one arm pillowed behind her head. "Cas isn't here, so it's not like they'll be begging him to cure their hemorrhoids or whatever."

Carl hesitated. "You really don't think he's coming back, do you?"

"He did what he promised. He got us to safety," Claire sighed. It wasn't a *yes*, but not quite a *no* either. "He promised Jake and Scott, too." She paused, her gaze fixed on Carl's ceiling. "And he made *me* promise I wouldn't chase after his dumb ass, so here we are. Right now, all I can do is hope that for once in his very, very, very, *very* long life he actually knows what he's doing."

"Hey, I never promised *anything*," Carl pointed out, very reasonably. "What if I go?" he suggested. "I was a decent shot before my face got all messed up. Not as good as Scott, obviously, but if I could get my hand on a weapon, get inside the Sanctuary…" He shrugged. "All I've gotta do is take Negan out. How hard could that be?"

"Dude," Mikey huffed, shaking his head. "She *just* said don't be stupid."

Enid hummed in agreement. Her eyes were glued to the book in her lap.

More rustling came from outside Carl's door; Olivia was probably trying to eavesdrop again.

Visibly irritated, Claire propped herself up. "So, what time are we kicking off the orgy?" she said, her voice loud enough to carry through the door.

There was a brief pause. "Dinner's on the table," Olivia said icily.

Claire flushed. "Oh."

Refusing a home-cooked meal was out of the question, no matter how awkward it got. The only person around the table who seemed blissfully oblivious to the tension was Judith, seated in her high chair, kicking her little feet against the table and smashing spaghetti into her face, happy as anything.

"I heard little Oliver is settling in great over at Barbara's," Olivia ventured to strike up a conversation, twirling spaghetti around her fork. She lowered her voice a bit, as if sharing a secret, "I think they'll be good for each other."

Carl managed a polite smile. "Sure."

Olivia set her fork down with a sigh before reaching over to pat his hand. "Rick and Michonne will be back before you know it." She turned to Claire, offering a reassuring smile. "Your uncle, too, I'm sure. Then we can put this whole… misunderstanding behind us."

Claire was absently poking around her plate and didn't seem to realize Olivia was speaking to her until Mikey elbowed her in the ribs. "Huh?" She blinked, looking up in surprise. "Uncle?"

Olivia arched an eyebrow, her tone turning just a shade drier. "Castiel? I thought you said he was your father's twin."

"Oh, yeah. Just easy to forget sometimes," Claire said, recovering smoothly. She picked up her water glass and took a sip. "Dad was the handsome one."

Clearing her throat, Olivia dabbed at her mouth with her napkin. "Well, Castiel is still very handsome, isn't he?" she said, trying to sound nonchalant.

"He has a boyfriend, Liv," Enid said distractedly, her eyes still glued to her book.

"Oh no, really?" Olivia flushed. "Wait, not *oh no* like that," she stammered, flustered, her cheeks turning pink as she looked down at her plate. She sighed, then glanced over at Enid with a forced smile. "What are you reading, dear?"

Without looking up, Enid angled the book so they could see the cover.

Frowning, Carl reached over and snatched it from her hands.

"Hey!" Enid protested.

At first glance, it looked like one of those books his mom used to keep tucked away on their library's highest shelf, assuming Carl wouldn't find a way to reach it. The cover featured a hyper-realistic drawing of an improbably buff guy, naked except for a strategically placed swirl of what looked like bedsheets draped over his back and down to his lap. His jaw was so chiseled it bordered on a birth defect. Squinting, Carl realized that the "bedsheets" were actually supposed to be a pair of oddly shaped wings.

"Of Celestial Beings and Angelic Lore," Carl read the title aloud, snorting. "Where did you even get this?"

"Gabriel told me I could have it. I got it from his office." Enid huffed, making a grab for the book. "Give it back, Carl!"

Carl held it just out of her reach, flipping through the pages. "Wait – are these Gabriel's notes?"

"I don't know." Enid threw up her hands, fixing him with a glare. "Probably not. He said he found this book on a scavenging run last week."

"Found it where?" Carl wondered.

"Gee, I don't know," she said, rolling her eyes. "Think the Saviors would mind if I dropped by to ask him?"

The book was at least twice as thick as it had originally been, crammed with handwritten notes, sketches, and even diagrams. Sheets of lined paper were stapled over existing pages, the margins overflowing with scribbled annotations and half-finished thoughts. Entire sections had been slashed through almost angrily, with cramped handwriting filling in the missing passages, like a teacher scrawling corrections across a poorly written school paper.

Some of the original illustrations were surprisingly beautiful – various artists' renderings of angelic figures and wings, with Biblical scenes laid out in intricate detail. Most of these survived relatively unscathed, with only a few notes scribbled into the margins.

Carl paused when he spotted a few photographs paper-clipped to one of the pages. Curious, he slipped them free and began flipping through, balancing the book on the edge of the dining table. It was an unusual photoshoot: a blonde woman in a gray suit, lying flat between two massive charcoal-drawn wings. Her pose was stiff and unnatural, legs twisted awkwardly beneath her. Some of the shots zoomed in on the fine details of the charcoal wings, so precise and intricate that he could make out each individual feather.

"Weird," Carl mumbled. He'd seen enough dead bodies to know the redness blooming through her white blouse wasn't just for show.

Enid snatched the book back, glaring.

Later, after his friends had left and Judith was tucked away in bed, Carl stood over the sink, washing dishes. "I've got it," he told Olivia, motioning to the stack. "Go home, Liv. I'm sure you miss your own bed by now. We're fine here."

She hesitated, hovering near the kitchen table.

"If my dad asks why you left, tell him I threatened to stab you with a fork." Carl smirked, setting another plate on the drying rack. "This brainwashing's got me all kinds of messed up. I'm basically a ticking time bomb."

Olivia rolled her eyes. "Goodnight, Carl. Please try not to fork anyone in my absence." She gave him a knowing look.

He blinked, then flushed, and *then* opened the kitchen window to call after her, "You're lucky I'm too brainwashed to think of a comeback!"

A few hours later, when Judith woke him at the crack of dawn, Carl found himself wondering just what the goddamn hell he'd been thinking, kicking Olivia out the door. He rolled off his stupid beanbag with a pathetic groan, hitting the floor in a tangled heap of blankets.

He lay there for a moment, face pressed against the cold floor, wondering just how terrible of an older brother he'd be if he let Judith scream something to the effect of "Freedom!" for just five more minutes.

Then, remembering that Hell was a real place, he pushed himself upright with a defeated sigh. "Alright, I'm up, I'm up."

He dug around for an old bandage and slapped it haphazardly over his face; partly out of habit, partly because Judith was talking now and was totally a snitch.

“CAAAL!” His sweet little baby sister continued to screech from her bedroom down the hall. The foundations of their home had likely begun to crack. Somewhere outside their walls, walkers’ heads were possibly exploding. “LEMME OUT! LEMME OUT! LEMME OUT!”

“Hell is a real place,” he reminded himself, muttering under his breath.

Peace returned to their little home not long after. Judith had her juice, her toys, and her good mood back. She seemed perfectly content bouncing around the living room while Carl sprawled on the sofa, fighting to keep his eyes open.

Just as he felt himself drifting, he heard the front door creak open. Sighing, he dragged himself up, ready to greet Olivia. “Morning–”

“Mama!” Judith squealed, abandoning her toy and sprinting across the room.

Michonne scooped Judith up, holding her close and pressing soft kisses to her forehead. “Hey, sweetheart,” she murmured, brushing a strand of hair out of Judith’s face. She held her close for a moment, her eyes filled with warmth as Judith babbled excitedly about everything and nothing in particular.

“Hey,” Carl said awkwardly, fully awake now. “Um, where’s dad?”

Michonne’s gaze shifted to Carl, and her mouth tightened. She looked, well, not *angry*, not really, but like she was gearing up to be. It wasn’t a look he often found himself on the receiving end of. It felt… pretty lousy, actually.

“Still out,” Michonne said with a sigh, shifting Judith on her hip. “He’ll be home soon.”

He fiddled with his shirt, avoiding her gaze. “Right.”

They hadn’t left things on good terms. Sure, Carl *could* ask Michonne where she’d run off to with his dad, or question the grease stains on her clothes. But he didn’t. He knew they’d only tell him when they trusted him again, and right now, they weren’t so sure if they could.

He was pretty sure Michonne arriving first wasn’t a coincidence. They must’ve thought she’d have an easier time getting through to him.

“Carl–” she began.

“It’s okay, Michonne. I’m going to tell you everything,” he said quickly, cutting her off. “Um, you’re probably gonna want to sit down for this.”

The fire raged for hours, devouring priceless antiques, essential winter provisions, wooden supports, and, oh – that *gorgeous* library. Sam had only gotten a quick peek at it, but the thought of all those lost books left his eyes burning with more than just the sting of black smoke.

The Hilltop community wasn't unprepared. They kept fire extinguishers at every trailer and shed, and two more inside the blacksmith's workshop. However, once the large propane tank behind the mansion had exploded, it became clear to all that any and all firefighting efforts were best spent protecting the walls and surrounding structures. The mansion was already lost, but there was still hope for the Hilltop.

Sam was determined to keep that hope alive, even as the fire painted the night in red and orange, polluting the air with heat and smoke; even with the dead horde clawing at the outer walls, their groans rising above the crackle of flames.

The hours stretched as corpses continued piling up beyond the walls. Dean and his friend worked tirelessly, unseen, to cull the undead horde. Still they kept on coming, an endless tide of mindless drive and destruction. Inside the walls, people moved with purpose, each with a task at hand, a piece of the larger survival puzzle – hauling water, readying weapons, and, if it came to it, preparing for a possible escape.

It was a long night, but as the first hints of daylight began to brush the horizon, and as the flames finally dwindled into smoldering embers, a fragile sense of relief settled over the community. It was short-lived.

"Get a spotlight over here, now!" Sam's voice rang out, leaving no room for arguments. There was a breach in the wall.

People scrambled to follow his instructions, weapons and tools at the ready. They'd prepared for this possibility. Fortunately, the wall hadn't collapsed, with most of its supports still in place – but there were gaps, large enough for the dead to squeeze through one by one.

"Earl, think you can patch it up?" Sam asked mid-swing, another dead body falling at his feet.

By all accounts, Earl Sutton was a skilled craftsman. More than that, he was calm and level-headed – the best kind of person Sam could ask for in a crisis. Earl didn't blink when an arm squeezed through the gap; he waited patiently for a Hilltop resident to sever it with an ax before returning to his work.

"It's not going to look pretty, but I'll make it work," he said gruffly, setting the welding mask over his face. "Just keep these damn things off my back!"

Together, Sam and a small group of Hilltop residents worked to stem the flow of the undead, protecting the community and buying Earl the time he needed to reinforce the walls. Between swings, Sam fired off questions to the people moving around him:

"What's the status outside the walls? Anyone got eyes on my brother yet?" The hex bags only lasted a few hours before the effect wore off; Dean and his friend wouldn't be able to hold their ground for much longer. "You – how's your arm holding up?" They'd suffered a few casualties fighting the Saviors before their uneasy truce. "Jesus, check in with each group leader – make sure no one's missing." Truce or no truce, the Saviors were not to be trusted.

Eventually, a young woman appeared to pull Sam away, waving for someone else to take his place in the defensive line. Her name was Tara. Despite their brief acquaintance, she'd proven to be exactly the kind of person he'd want watching his back.

"*Dude*," Tara said in a voice that brooked no argument. "Take a break."

"Just for a second," he muttered, catching his breath. Noticing the handheld radio in her hand, he asked, "Any luck reaching your friends?"

For the past few hours, Tara had been trying to send out a distress signal, hoping to reach anyone still out there who could lend a hand. Unfortunately, none of her messages seemed to be getting through.

"No dice," Tara huffed, her brows furrowing. "But listen to this. It's so weird."

She turned the dial, and immediately, a sharp screech pierced the air. People around them jumped in surprise, including Sam, who instinctively covered his ears. He *knew* that sound. But before he could say anything, the static suddenly rose in pitch, becoming an ear-splitting shriek.

Startled, Tara dropped the radio. It fell to the ground with a dull thud. The shriek grew sharper, vibrating through the device until, with a loud pop, the radio sparked and died, a wisp of smoke curling from its casing.

"What in God's name was that?" Earl grunted, lifting the welder's mask to peer over at them, his voice rough with irritation.

"It's okay," Sam replied quickly. "Just some background interference, probably fried the thing," he lied, keeping his voice steady.

Earl gave him a skeptical look before turning back to his work. Tara, however, kept squinting at the broken device on the ground, her brows knitted. "Interference?" Tara echoed in disbelief, catching Sam's gaze.

"It's… complicated," he told her with a grimace.

A lot of things interfered with radio signals, but only one thing sounded like *that*.

They hadn't seen angels since… well. It had been a long time. As far as Sam knew, Heaven had shut its doors, sealing itself off from the chaos down on Earth. The absence of angels had become a twisted sort of blessing; even as the world struggled to survive, it was, at least, an apocalypse of humanity's own doing. But if the angels were back? If they'd decided, suddenly, to make Earth their playground again…

Why here, why now? What were those winged assholes playing at?

Unless…

Well.

Unless Castiel was closer than any of them could have guessed.

“Really complicated,” Sam stressed, before a commotion by the wall commanded his attention.

“Watch it, boy!”

“Doing my best, Earl!” the young man – teenager, really – shot back just as his blade passed inches from the older man’s head. A corpse fell to the ground, splattering Earl with its rancid blood.

The kid’s name was Calvin, or maybe Melvin; Sam couldn’t quite recall. But he’d shown up with a weapon in hand, determined to fight, and that was good enough for him.

Calvin – or Melvin – struck again, and another body crumpled at his feet. This time, though, his weapon went down with it, the blade wedged deep in the creature’s skull. Not knowing any better, the kid’s hand remained locked on his weapon; he stumbled, dragged down by the weight of the corpse. Panic flashed in his eyes as he struggled to pull his blade free, hands slipping against the slick handle.

The kid was easy prey. They were on him in seconds.

Moving quickly, Sam bodily threw one of the dead creatures off Calvin (or Melvin). He took the head off another with a swift strike of his weapon, then drove his forearm under the jaw of a third, holding it back before it could tear the kid’s face off.

Unfortunately, the creature’s jaw snapped under the pressure. It died with its upper teeth buried deep in Sam’s arm.

The kid scrambled to his feet, staring at Sam in horror.

Glancing at his arm, Sam sighed. “Damn.”

Stepping closer, Tara paled as she took in the fresh bite. “Oh fuck,” she whispered, her hands flying to his arm, gripping it tightly in both hands as if she could somehow stop the infection from spreading. “Shit, okay, okay. It’s gonna be okay, Sam. We’ll take care of it.”

She wasn’t looking at Sam but instead scanning the area, frantically signaling others to come over. Within seconds, several Hilltop residents rushed forward, some to join the defensive line, others with their sights on Sam. One of them grasped a machete in a white-knuckled grip, his gaze fixed on Sam’s arm with a mix of resolve and dread.

Sam’s eyes widened as they closed in. “Woah, woah, guys. It’s okay! You don’t need to hack anything off.” Glancing behind him to confirm that the situation at the wall was under control, he tugged at his collar, revealing the faded scar just beneath his clavicle, only inches from his anti-possession tattoo. He attempted a reassuring smile, “Seriously, I’m fine.”

They all stared. The man holding the machete lowered it slowly, a look of relief spreading across his face.

“You’ve been bit before?” Tara breathed, her grip on his arm loosening.

Sam took the chance to slip free. He nodded. “Yeah, turns out I don’t… turn.” He shook his arm. The new bite stung, but he’d been chewed up by far worse things in the line of duty. Still, he figured he’d better get it disinfected sooner rather than later. “I swear, I’m fine.”

“Holy shit, dude.” Tara shook her head in disbelief. “How?”

Shrugging, Sam said, “Honestly, I’ve a few theories, but–”

Tara cut him off. “No, I mean how did one of them even *reach*?” She squinted up at his collarbone, brow furrowed. “You’re like… what, seven feet tall?”

Sam rolled his eyes. “Only six-four, but thanks for the boost.”

“That walker must’ve climbed you like a *ladder*.”

He sighed, feeling a sudden pang of dread at the thought of introducing Tara to his brother.

He still remembered how rattled he’d been the first time he got bit. A month or two following Castiel’s disappearance, he and his brother had gone rooting through an abandoned house, just as they’d done a million times before. A momentary lapse of judgment had Sam bending over a corpse, certain it was truly dead, and then –

He would never forget the look on Dean’s face.

They’d had close calls before, but the dead had never actually gotten the drop on either of them. All it took was a single moment of carelessness.

And with Castiel gone…

Sam and Dean soon said their tearful goodbyes. Sam made his brother promise he wouldn’t do anything stupid. Made him promise to let go.

And then – nothing.

Well, aside from a sore throat and a cough that stuck around for a few days. The bite simply scabbed over, fading into a scar instead of a death sentence. Over the next few weeks, Dean would flinch whenever Sam so much as cleared his throat, even though Sam was perfectly fine.

Sam was pretty confident he’d be perfectly fine after this bite, too. About as confident as he was that Dean would chew him out over it – so, somewhere in the high nineties.

“Earl, how much longer?” he called out with a sigh. The sun was nearly up.

“Give me a minute!” Earl barked, voice muffled behind the welder’s mask. “Or d’you want it half-done and collapsing on your head?”

Sam raised his hands in surrender. Then he noticed one of the Saviors-turned-allies sprinting toward him. His hand instinctively closed around the hilt of his knife, but he quickly realized the man was only aiming to get his attention. He was followed by two Hilltop residents.

“What is it?” Sam asked.

There was no panic in the man’s grim expression. “We have a situation.” He met Sam’s gaze steadily. “We need you in the medical trailer.”

Because Sam wasn’t born yesterday, he turned to the two Hilltop residents the Savior had been paired with. “What’s going on?” he asked them pointedly.

It was a father-son duo, though their names escaped him. “You should come with us,” the son said, grimacing as sweat beaded on his forehead. “Um, alone.”

His father, standing beside him, nodded grimly. Both wore clothes streaked with dirt – Sam guessed they must be some of the Hilltop’s gardeners.

“What exactly is this about?” Sam asked, frowning. The son shifted uneasily, glancing at his father, who looked equally uncomfortable.

“It’s Simon,” the Savior interjected, clearly irritated by the hesitation. “We think whatever’s wrong with him – it’s spreading.”

Sam felt his heart thudding in his chest. “What?”

They’d been keeping Simon locked up in one of the trailers ever since his crew had decided to surrender. He’d been looking worse by the hour – most of his teeth gone, his back hunched, skin sloughing off in patches, and yet he still spat venom whenever anyone got close. Sam was convinced someone had hexed the man, his sickness having all the telltale marks of a magical affliction.

But an infectious curse? He’d seen those before, but they were incredibly rare. It made no sense. Not unless Sam had missed something important.

“Who’s infected?” he pressed.

The father-son duo exchanged glances, hesitant. But the Savior, impatient, gruffly said, “A number of ours, plus that old broad Simon had at gunpoint yesterday.”

Earl, who had just finished reinforcing the wall and had been listening to the exchange, froze. His face went pale. “Tammy?” Without another word, he took off toward the medical trailer. Toward his wife.

Sam cursed under his breath. “Keep to the plan,” he told the others, his tone low and urgent. “We can’t let this cause a panic, so keep it to yourselves for now.” The Hilltop residents nodded, eyes wide with worry.

Sam signaled for the Savior and the father-son duo who’d come with him to follow. “You might need to quarantine too,” he told them grimly, motioning for the Savior to lead the way.

The medical trailer was quiet. In retrospect, that should've been Sam's first warning.

He barely had time to register Earl's lifeless body before he felt the blade slip between his ribs.

Pain exploded through his senses. Sam staggered, gripping the edge of the trailer wall, trying to keep himself upright. His hand went instinctively to the wound, but the warmth of his own blood was already spilling through his fingers, hot and slick. Behind him, he heard Tara's pained cry.

All it took was a single moment of carelessness.

Sam should've been more vigilant, but the person at his back had been a Hilltop resident, not a Savior. It hadn't even crossed his mind that one of the very people he was fighting to protect would be the one to stab him in the back.

Chapter End Notes

The Rains of Castamere play over the end credits

Would you kindly leave a comment? ❤️

Mene, Mene, Tekel, Upharsin

Chapter Notes

> Previously:
> The angel Castiel said unto the Saviors, Fear? YES. Dean and Daryl bond as they slaughter a horde of walkers outside the Hilltop, because *homies* is short for *homicide*. Meanwhile, Sam is BETRAYED. *Et tu, random citizen?*

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The sun never rose over the Sanctuary. The people tilted their faces skyward, desperate for even a glimpse of natural light through the thick, swirling whiteness, but salvation never came.

Without sunlight, the passage of time became impossible to measure. Hours bled into days, into weeks – perhaps even months. Inside the Sanctuary, every clock had stopped, as though time itself had been warped, corrupted by the unnatural mist. And although the sun never rose, the wind, it *whispered*. A chorus of a thousand faceless voices carried through the fog, distant and unintelligible. Unfathomable.

Sometimes, something else appeared in the sky.

An immense arched shadow would come drifting high above in the smoky mist, sweeping over the Sanctuary like some otherworldly satellite, gliding slowly at first, then faster and faster with every pass, wreathed in violent bursts of lightning too blinding to behold.

The soft wind would swell into a howling storm, and with it, the whispers – closer, louder, insistent. *In, in, let me in.*

Until, finally, the voices would come together in a single, deafening shriek. And when the colossal ring passed over the Sanctuary one last time – its people writhing, clutching their ears against the terrible cry – it was as if the air itself burned away, leaving behind a jarring, absolute silence. Those who still had breath in their lungs howled in voiceless terror, mouths agape, eyes bulging, yet no sound escaped into the vacuum.

It was always a mercy, when the whispers returned.

“Watch your back!”

Dean’s warning cut through the air as he swung, the long-handled scythe slicing clean through the neck of the walker lunging at Daryl’s back. Daryl didn’t flinch, duck, or even look over his shoulder; he simply slammed down with a rusty pitchfork when the creature’s head landed near his feet, skewering its skull with a solid *thunk*.

The Hilltop Colony was a farming community. The horde had destroyed their fields; wheat stalks flattened and ruined, soil churned up by the relentless trudge of so many feet. However, the scattered tools left behind had caught Dean and Daryl's attention early on. They each grabbed what they could use, preferring the long reach of the gardening tools over their own short blades.

"They're catching on," Daryl huffed in dismay. He yanked at the pitchfork, but its pronged head snapped off, embedded in the walker's skull.

Dean tossed him a pair of pruning shears. "Starting to, yeah. Magic's fading," he said as Daryl put the tool to work. "We better haul ass."

It had been a long night, and as the first rays of sunlight broke over the horizon, Dean felt a wave of relief as the glow of flames finally disappeared from above the walls. They'd been at it for hours, fighting tooth and nail to cull the horde's numbers. Yet for every corpse that fell at their feet, two more seemed to stumble up the hill. Now, with the fire gone, all that remained was to clear the dead amassed outside the walls.

Easier said than done. The hex bags gave them an advantage over the dead, but the magic was failing. Even a *muggle* like Dean could feel the spell weakening, losing power by the minute. He and Daryl were caked in enough filth to stay hidden a little longer, but sooner or later, the dead were bound to sniff them out.

"We gon' try the backdoor again?" Daryl suggested, leaning forward on his knees, taking advantage of the momentary lull to catch his breath.

"That's what she said," Dean quipped automatically, though his heart wasn't really in it.

Every inch of his body was crying out in protest; from his strained shoulders and heavy arms down to the searing pain in his leg, the bullet hole throbbing under his stitches. He dreaded what he might find on closer inspection, uncertain if the festering smell was coming from his own wound or just the stench of death surrounding them.

As if reading Dean's mind, Daryl jerked his head toward the towering walls. "They got a doctor. Might as well let 'em look at that leg."

Dean grimaced. "We'll see."

In all honesty, he had zero intention of sticking around any longer than he had to. The Hilltop's doctor could do his worst with someone else; Dean had his own priorities. As soon as they were in the clear, Dean was making a straight shot to Alexandria.

To Cas.

…Maybe after a change of clothes, though.

Daryl gave him a narrowed-eyed look. The kind that said: *don't be a fucking moron*.

"Yeah, yeah, gotta get inside first, don't we?" Dean deflected, turning away before Daryl could press the issue.

At least the Hilltop's back entrance was no longer quite so backed up, now that the guy hanging over the trap door had turned. All that wriggling had loosened the rope; the walker was dangling a few inches off the ground, swaying slightly with each mindless twitch. Its face was bloated, the skin turned an unnatural purple-gray, and its mouth opened and closed repeatedly behind its trapped arm, as though it was working up a strongly-worded complaint regarding its lot in death.

His name had been Gregory, Jesus had said. The Hilltop's leader, though he hadn't seemed too torn up about it.

Daryl shrugged at Dean's unspoken question. "Guy was a prick."

There might have been fewer walkers lingering near the back entrance, but 'fewer' still added up to too damn many. They pushed forward slowly, their boots sinking into the dirt and scuffing against twisted limbs and bloated torsos – the fruits of their labor. Halfway there, Dean caught a familiar sound, one that made his heart sink to his stomach: the deep, guttural rumble of a heavy engine.

"Wait," he said, grabbing Daryl's shoulder just as a loud, hollow thunder rumbled, shaking the walls and sending a tremor through the ground.

For a moment, nothing happened. Then came a deep, heavy groan as a ten-foot-wide section of the Hilltop's walls began to buckle, the massive logs splintering and crashing down like some of Purgatory's felled giants. They leaped out of the way just as a thick wooden beam slammed into the earth, sending a cloud of splinters into the air.

This was no attack; it was a deliberate demolition.

"They're gonna get mobbed," Dean coughed, grabbing Daryl's offered hand.

No sooner had the words left his mouth than piercing screams and frantic shouts erupted from the direction of the Hilltop. The horde poured into the settlement, their lumbering figures stark against the fine mist of wood dust hanging in the air. Gunfire crackled, scattered and panicked. Another blast shattered the main gates, sending the dead surging en masse to flood the breach. Then came a third explosion, and a fourth, sections of the Hilltop's walls collapsing in succession.

Vehicles came barreling out past the ruins, fitted metal cages slamming into the mass of bodies, flinging thick clumps of blood and viscera in the air. They jostled for space along the narrow path, scraping against one another in their rush before tearing off into the unknown. Dean saw Gregory's head burst open like a ripe melon under the massive wheel of a semi.

The Hilltop Colony had fallen, and Sam's last resort, his evacuation plan, was now in motion. One thing was clear, though: this was no coordinated retreat. The walls had been breached without warning. Somewhere inside, something had gone terribly wrong.

A single thought rattled inside Dean's head:

"I have to find my brother."

He didn't ask Daryl to follow, but as Dean's scythe carved a path forward, his friend fell into step beside him.

As soon as they closed in on the nearest breach, a small hatchback attempted to pass the ruins, its engine roaring in protest as it struggled over the uneven ground. The damn thing was completely unsuited for the task – it skidded off the fallen logs and crashed into a walker, the creature's body folding in half as it slammed into the car's windshield, cracking it. Another found itself dragged beneath the hatchback's wheels. Predictably, the car jolted into a complete stop, tires spinning helplessly in the terrible slurry of gore and dirt.

The dead immediately swarmed the vehicle, trapping its occupants inside. Dean caught a glimpse of the driver – a man in his forties, frozen behind the wheel – and the woman and child in the backseat, their desperate screams muffled by the press of bodies against the car.

Daryl didn't hesitate to jump into the fray. Dean followed suit, the family's screams echoing in his ears, the fading magic barely holding the dead at bay. Daryl scrambled onto the car, gripping the edges of the roof as he tried to wrench the small sunroof open, aiming to pull the family out. But where to? The dead kept coming, a relentless tide frenzied by the promise of an easy meal.

Another vehicle suddenly came roaring toward them, a towering off-road box truck decked in camouflage. Seeing his chance, Dean threw his hex bag to the ground and ran into the truck's path, frantically waving it down. The driver, mercifully, spotted him in time to hit the brakes.

"Pull over!" Dean shouted, but the man behind the wheel just stared back in wide-eyed confusion, his face ghostly pale. With a growl of frustration, Dean slashed through two walkers, stormed to the truck, and yanked the door open. "*Move*," he snarled.

Sliding into the driver's seat, Dean slammed the truck into gear and barreled toward the hatchback, mowing down the dead in his path. Moments later found him standing in the truck's cab, his body braced against the window frame, while Daryl attempted to wrestle the couple's young daughter out through the car's sunroof.

The little girl clung to Daryl's neck like a limpet, her tiny arms locked in an iron grip. Despite his urgent coaxing, she refused to let go, twisting away whenever he tried to pass her over to Dean. Below, bony fingers clawed at the car's roof, their jagged nails scraping dangerously close to Daryl's boots.

"Addy!" the woman inside the car screamed, lifting her head from the sunroof. Her resemblance to her daughter was striking. "What are you doing? Get in the truck! Get in the fucking truck *now!*"

If anything, the girl's arms only tightened around Daryl's neck. She looked to be around eight or seven, and absolutely terrified. Dean exchanged a loaded look with Daryl; they didn't have a lot of time.

"Hey there, Addy," Dean called up to her from his perch on the truck's window, keeping his voice steady despite the tension coiling in his gut. "I'm Dean." Her wide eyes darted toward

him, and he offered a quick, easy grin. “You know the guy you’ve got in a chokehold? That’s my buddy Daryl. He’s a tough one, but he’s gonna need you to ease up a bit, okay?”

“Chokehold’s illegal,” Daryl told her seriously.

Muffled shouts from the truck’s unseen passengers rose from the back, frantic and fearful. Inside the cab behind Dean, the driver was losing his nerve. “They’re all over us! You’re killing us here, man!” he shouted, his voice breaking with desperation.

Dean snapped his head around. “Wait one goddamn second!” he hissed before turning back to Addy, his expression softening into calm reassurance. “I won’t drop you, sweetheart, but you’ve got to let go now. Just keep your eyes on me, okay?”

The girl slowly loosened her grip, letting Daryl carefully pass her into Dean’s waiting arms. “That’s it,” Dean murmured softly. Her feet swung mere inches above the grasping hands of the dead, their fingers clawing uselessly at the empty air. “Don’t look down, Addy. Just look at me. Only me. You’ve got this.”

With Addy secured in the truck’s cab, Daryl turned his attention to her mother. He steadied her as she climbed through the hatchback’s sunroof, her glasses askew and her wide, fearful eyes darting toward Dean. She hesitated for a moment before finally reaching for his hand.

And that was when everything fell apart.

A walker had clambered onto the car’s windshield. As its fingers scraped against the cracked glass, the fractured windshield gave way with a sharp crack, splintering into hundreds of tiny shards. It crawled inside the car, sending Addy’s dad scrambling out of the sunroof a moment too soon, kicking at the dead creature snapping clumsily at his feet.

The car shuddered and groaned under the combined weight of all three – Daryl and the girl’s parents, not to mention the dead pressing on all sides – its roof beginning to buckle. With a startled cry, Addy’s mom lost her footing and toppled over the far side of the car, dragging Daryl down with her.

The dead surged toward the noise, a wave of snarling bodies closing in on the pair. “Daryl!” Dean shouted. Behind him, Addy let out a desperate wail, crying out for her mother.

Grabbing his scythe, Dean jumped out and vaulted over the car roof. He hit the ground heavily on the other side, a shock of pain shooting up his injured leg. The truck didn’t wait. It veered off, tires screeching in the mud as it sped away, the little girl’s crying pulling away with it.

Dean was too late.

The dead wasted no time ripping Addy’s mom apart. As her piercing screams turned to gurgling moans, Daryl scrambled out from under her, protected by the last traces of magic that clung to him still, saving him from the brunt of the walkers’ attention. Moving quickly, Dean swung his scythe, covering Daryl’s escape.

But Dean no longer had such protection. Struggling to hold back the dead, Dean's arms burned as he braced against the car, his back pressed to the passenger window, feeling the push of the walker trapped inside straining against the glass. He glanced up and caught sight of Addy's dad, still standing atop the hatchback, his wide eyes fixed on the horror playing out just feet away.

"Get down," Dean snapped at Addy's dad, shoving another walker away with his scythe.

The undead creature fell on its back, and when it turned its head, its focus shifted away from Dean. Instead, it crawled along the ground until it found a slim ankle, peeking out of the frenzied feeding pile of walkers. Dazed, still staring, Addy's dad jumped down, landing next to Dean on shaking feet.

Separated by a crowd of walkers, Daryl shouted, "Get inside, I'll cover you!" His voice was hoarse and raw as he tore through the dead with ruthless, almost feral efficiency. "Go! Find your brother!"

Nowhere to go except in. Dean let out a low, frustrated growl. "Come on," he snapped, grabbing Addy's dad by the scruff of his shirt and hauling him through the ruins.

Two people barreled past them, one slamming into Dean's shoulder without so much as a glance, ignoring his shouted warning. Moments later, their screams echoed behind him as Dean shoved forward, dragging the dazed man along. He'd be damned if he let that girl lose another parent tonight.

Inside the walls, it was pure, unadulterated chaos. The air was suffocating and thick with dust and smoke, seeping into his lungs like smog. Addy's dad stumbled after Dean in a daze, shock written in his vacant expression, while all around them, screams intermingled with the death cries of livestock and the guttural moans of the undead, blending together in a symphony of terror.

Weapon flying, Dean searched frantically for any sign of his brother. "Sam!" he yelled, unable to stop himself, even as the sound pulled more of the dead to them. "Sam! Where the hell are you?"

He slashed through one shambling corpse after another, stepping past piles of frenzied feedings and the strewn bodies of the recently deceased, still warm and twitching, an open buffet for the ravenous dead. He saw a man leaping from a collapsing scaffolding as it broke away from the wall, breaking his legs with a sickening crunch. The dead were on him before Dean could do a thing.

A middle-aged man stepped out of a nearby trailer, holding a double-barreled shotgun, blood caked in his long beard, and murder burning in his eyes. He fired, dropping two walkers with a single gunshot. But when his gaze landed on them, his expression twisted with rage. Before Dean could register what was happening, the barrel of the shotgun shifted in their direction.

Dean reacted instinctively, grabbing Addy's dad and yanking him aside just as the shotgun fired. As he dragged them around a corner, he glanced back and caught a final glimpse of the

middle-aged man slamming the butt of his shotgun into a walker's skull before the horde closed in on him.

"What the hell was that?" Dean growled, but Addy's dad only stared back at him, wide-eyed and speechless.

"Look out!" someone called out somewhere nearby.

A grenade rolled into his path, though he didn't see who had thrown it. Dean dove behind one of the trailers, dragging Addy's dad with him just as it exploded, sending dirt and shrapnel raining down around them, along with body parts from the dead caught in the blast radius.

Three walkers nearly caught him off guard, emerging from around a corner of rubble, their rotting hands grazing his skin. Snarling, he pulled back, creating some distance between them. One of the walkers was hobbling on a foot that was twisted a full one-eighty. Dean shoved it to the ground and slashed through the skull of the second, but at the absolute worst moment, the scythe snapped in his hands.

Cursing, he yanked out his spare knife – an angel blade – and plunged it into the third's skull before finishing off the one he'd shoved down. He barely had a second to catch his breath before four more stumbled around the corner, their blank eyes locking onto him.

"Let's dance, motherfuckers," he growled under his breath, flipping the blade into position.

The blade's short range forced him into close quarters with the dead, each swing bringing him just inches from their snapping teeth. What followed was a series of close calls, but by the skin of his teeth, Dean managed to gain the upper hand. He took three down but found himself grappling with the forth, a freshly turned walker with unsettling speed and strength.

Suddenly, Addy's dad appeared to break free from his stupor. With a burst of desperate strength, the man drove a piece of broken wood into the head of the walker, stopping it cold.

"Thanks," Dean ground out, his words clipped as he fought to steady his breathing. He grimaced, testing his shoulder before turning to the man. "You good?"

The man stared back at him, eyes hollow.

"Fair enough," Dean sighed, shaking his head.

He motioned for the man to follow, leading them between two evenly spaced trailers. Weapon raised, he peered around the corner, his eyes narrowing against the stinging smoke that clung to the air like tar. Spotting two walkers ahead, Dean moved to attack. But before he could act, a chicken darted out of the rubble, clucking frantically as it bolted past the walkers. They immediately veered off in pursuit, their groans shifting into predatory snarls.

Dropping his weapon to his side, Dean exhaled sharply and turned to Addy's father. "What the fuck happened here, man?" His voice hardened. "Was it the Saviors?"

Addy's dad shook his head. His hands, covered in dry flakes of blood, trembling as they hovered uselessly at his sides. "I… I don't know," he stammered, a hitch in his voice. His

gaze darted away for a moment before snapping back to Dean. “I took the car… I didn’t know what else to do. I didn’t know! We were supposed to go out with the first convoy, but they left without us. *They left*.” His voice cracked, rising in pitch. “They said that when the walls came down, we’d have enough time to – to evacuate.” A sob wrecked his frame. “That's what they said.”

“Who said that? Was it Sam?” Dean cut in sharply, leaning closer. It had been Sam’s plan after all – the last resort. “Do you know where he is? My brother?”

The man’s eyes darted nervously again, his throat bobbing as he swallowed hard. His pale face glistened with sweat. He opened his mouth as if to speak, then shut it, shaking his head. “Your brother?” He hesitated, then looked away again. “I-I don’t know, I’m sorry.” He absently pressed his hand to the dried, rust-colored stain on his stomach. “It all happened so fast.”

That wasn’t his blood. Dean’s brow furrowed, a flicker of suspicion prickling at the back of his mind. Before he could press further, a call for help caught his attention. Squinting through the haze, he spotted movement near the ground, where a figure was huddled under a trailer’s front steps.

Dean approached quickly, his boots crunching over the debris. An older man emerged from under the stairs, shaky and bruised but able to stand on his own two feet. He winced, clutching his side as he spoke. “Help my boy,” he gasped, voice tight with pain. “He’s hurt bad. I tried to get him out, but there’s too many of them. I couldn’t – couldn’t do it alone.”

Sighing, Dean knelt down to take the son’s pulse, ignoring the pain shooting in angry pulses up his thigh.

“Please help him,” the father begged, standing over them. “All the cars are gone. We were – they didn’t take us with them. They left us behind.” He shuddered. “The doctor left, too.”

Dean’s hand dropped to his side. “I’m sorry,” he said, hating this.

The man’s son was – or had been – a young man in his early twenties, wearing the same blood-soaked overalls as his old man. He’d taken a beating recently. Very recently, given that his busted-up face hadn’t had a chance to swell. Most glaringly, his wrist ended in a bloody stump, the amputation recent and messy. The hand rested, discarded, a few feet away from the corpse.

“Saviors do this?” Dean asked, indicating the kid’s messed-up face.

“The dead,” the father whispered, kneeling down to take his son’s remaining hand in his own trembling, blood-stained palms. “It was quick. I-I don’t think the infection had time to take.”

The dead didn’t mess up your kid’s face. Dean didn’t voice the thought. He glanced up at Addy’s dad, who quickly looked away. No help there.

“If you stay here, you’ll die with him,” Dean said bluntly. He raised his blade in offer, catching the father’s glossy, unfocused gaze. “I’ll make it quick, if you want. You don’t have

to look."

"He just needs a doctor," the father whispered.

"He's dead," Dean said, his tone sharper than he'd intended. "I'm sorry."

Around him, other voices pierced the chaos – shouts for help, desperate cries from people who might still have a chance. And somewhere in all of this, Sam.

The father kept staring at his son, unmoving. Dean knew he wasn't going anywhere.

Dean had no choice but to leave him behind. The self-loathing could wait.

Sam, where the hell are you?

Awareness crept in slowly. The first thing Sam registered was pain – a pounding headache and a deep ache in his back that throbbed with every jolt of the road. They were on the move.

Feigning unconsciousness, Sam took a mental tally of his situation. He'd been placed in a recovery position, lying on his side with his arms stretched out in front of him. Someone had taken the trouble to drape a blanket over him, but had also bound his wrists together.

He felt a hand press at his neck, and instinct took over. Sam lashed out, his tied fists connecting with something solid. The impact sent a splitting, searing pain through his skull as he scrambled to his knees, groaning in sync with the man he'd struck. Blinking past the haze clouding his vision, he tried to focus.

"Dr. Carson?" Sam rasped, confused.

They'd met at the Hilltop, albeit briefly. Dr. Harlan Carson was the settlement's physician, a soft-spoken man who, as far as Sam could judge, appeared to be a well-respected member of the community.

Wincing, Carson gingerly pressed his fingers to his face. "Nice," he sighed, working his jaw. He glanced at Sam, giving him a thorough once-over. He'd been cuffed as well, though he'd managed to slip a pair of blue latex gloves over his hands. "How do you feel, Sam? Any numbness, or shortness of breath?"

The doctor started moving closer. Flinching, Sam raised his fists. "Don't," he warned, his voice rough, before gingerly leaning back against the wall. He squeezed his eyes shut, trying to ward off the nausea that surged with each jolt of the moving van.

He racked his brain, struggling to piece together how he'd ended up here. Every movement sent waves of pain pulsing through his back and head, throbbing in sync. It came to him in bits and pieces. The Saviors had lured him into the medical trailer with some story about an infection. That had to be a lie, hadn't it? They killed Earl. That much he was certain of. And then, they stabbed him in the back.

Adrenaline had kept him on his feet. Anger had fueled the rest. Sam remembered – landing a punch on a surprised face, then another, and another, remembered the satisfying crack of cartridge and bone against his knuckles. The trailer floor had been slick with the old man's blood. The Saviors surrounding him, pain exploding at the back of his head, and then – nothing.

Wait, not Saviors.

Not *just* Saviors.

Damn it.

The doctor's voice cut through the fog in Sam's mind. "–lost a lot of blood."

Sam's eyes flickered open. "What?" he groaned.

Carson raised his hands, palms out in a placating gesture. "I packed the wound as best I could, but this isn't exactly a trauma unit. You've lost a lot of blood, Sam. I'm surprised you're even awake."

Sam ignored him, his gaze sweeping over the dimly lit interior. They were in the back of a moving van, stacked high with boxes. A faint light flickered overhead from a dim fixture in the roof. His eyes landed on a couple of body bags tucked among the crates, and his frown deepened.

"I strongly suggest you lie back down," Carson said firmly. When Sam merely scoffed at him, he sighed, dropping his bound hands in his lap. "Or don't. What do I know? I'm just a doctor."

"I'm fine," Sam responded roughly, eyeing Carson with suspicion. Trust wasn't something he was handing out easily right now. "What happened at the Hilltop?" he demanded to know. This was one of the vehicles they'd prepared in case of an evacuation. His gut twisted with the implication.

"You put up one hell of a fight," Carson replied with a raised eyebrow, a hint of grudging respect in his tone. "The Saviors didn't know what they were up against."

"Weren't all Saviors," he shot back, raising a hand to the back of his head.

Carson paused, looking pained. "People do stupid things when they're afraid," he ventured, his gaze flickering to his bound hands in his lap. Slowly, he peeled off his gloves, one finger at a time. "Doesn't matter anymore. What's done is done." Sighing, he added, "The Saviors told me to keep you alive as long as I could. You're a prize, Sam."

"Lucky me," Sam scoffed, leaning back.

After a moment, Carson leaned in slightly, lowering his voice. "I don't think they know you've been bitten." He glanced meaningfully at Sam's arm. "I can make it quick, if you prefer."

Sam’s eyes flickered to his bandaged arm. “I’m immune,” he said flatly.

The doctor looked at him, brow furrowed. After a long moment, he seemed to accept it, though there was still a contemplative frown on his face. "Right," he said, his voice soft. “If you say so.”

Sam let out a slow exhale. “Do you know where they’re taking us?” Although his body throbbed with every movement, he reminded himself that he’d survived a hell of a lot worse than this.

Carson paused, then offered a tired, almost wry smile. “Home, I’d wager.” He leaned back with a sigh. “I don’t imagine you’ve been dying to meet Negan, have you?”

Chapter End Notes

A few notes:

1) This story is really ballooning. For every chapter I plan out, three chapters somehow manage to wriggle their way in. We're getting there, folks! It's just taking a bit longer than I thought.
2) Sam wasn't actually supposed to show up until the next chapter, but I couldn't keep you thinking he might've died. Hey, remember that one time, I think maybe season 11, when Sam got shot IN THE GUT and then just... went into hibernation for some reason? And then was absolutley fine with a few stiches? Yeah. Winchesters, they're just built different.
3) I try to be super carefuly about the terms all the pov characters use. For example, Dean and Sam refer to herds as hordes, and none of the characters call the dead "walkers" until they've spent enough time with the og twd gang. However, the Hilltop residents (before the got assimilated by Rick and co) used to call them "growlers" - and I *cannot* in good conscience subject y’all to that.

Anyway, enjoy! And please would you kindly leave a comment ❤️

Make It a Little Longer

Chapter Notes

> Daryl Dixon escapes from the Sanctuary, meets Dean Winchester, imprints on Dean Winchester (it happens), and doesn't, like, take a mental health day, you know? Later on, Hilltop catches fire. Then it catches walkers. Oh, and Sam is kidnapped.
>
> I rewrote this thing six times, and I'm still not thrilled with it, but enough is enough. Ugh.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The Hilltop Colony was lost to the dead, but the living did not surrender so easily.

"You've made it this far," Dean ground out over and over, his voice ragged with pain and exhaustion, feet slipping on the uneven ground as the world tilted and spun at the edges of his vision. "Don't stop now."

He said it to the teenage girl who'd come crawling out from under a pile of rotted corpses. To the spear-wielding guard who'd lost his best friend to a stray bullet. He said it to the couple fighting side by side with weapons drawn and hands clasped, the woman's flowery dress and sandy blonde hair streaked in someone else's blood. Over and again, he said it to Addy's father, who trailed after Dean like a lost sheep.

When he said it to the older woman in her modest headscarf and bloodied machete, she looked him up and down and retorted, "Boy, you look a right mess."

She introduced herself as Tammy, the blacksmith's wife, and although she wasn't a fighter, she weaved through the dead with the single-minded desperation of a wife and mother. Like the others, Tammy couldn't lead Dean to his brother, but by pure chance, he helped her reunite with her son. They found the young man slumped behind an empty feed trough with two broken legs, his skin and clothes hastily smeared with viscera in a desperate attempt to evade the dead.

"I saw Dad," he whispered tearfully, and then swallowed a scream as two survivors draped his arms over their shoulders and lifted.

Twice now, Dean thought he'd spotted Jesus somewhere up ahead, but with far too many walking corpses between them, getting his attention seemed impossible. All he could do was move from cover to cover, work his way toward the burnt-out Hilltop mansion, help whoever crossed his path, and hope the next turn might lead him to Sam.

"We should look for a way out," Addy's father whispered, far too close to Dean's ear. "Anyone who's left is probably already dead." He'd introduced himself as *Robert* earlier, but

as far as Dean was concerned, the man's only purpose was to stay alive for his daughter.

"I'm not leaving without my brother," Dean grunted, yanking his blade free from yet another eye socket. He turned to glance at the tired faces behind him. The teenage girl clutched her arm to her chest, cradling what looked like a sprained elbow. He knew he needed to get these people somewhere safe – and soon. "What's ahead?" he asked, gesturing with the blade in his hand.

"Storm shelter," replied the guard, Eduardo. Taking the lead, the young man shoved two walkers with the length of his spear. "Not sure what shape it's in after the fire, but–" He froze mid-sentence, his eyes widening. "Oh no, no no no! What did they *do?*"

The guard's quiet swearing turned colorful. Frowning, Dean motioned for the others to hold the line while he took a closer look.

Dean had turned enough cemeteries in his day to know what a disturbed burial site looked like. The two graves had been scooped out and hollowed, soil piled messily to the side. Weeds and wild grass lay trampled flat, the ground scuffed with fresh footprints. It looked like the remains had been dragged away, leaving dark, uneven trails that disappeared into the bushes ahead. It was obvious that they'd left in a hurry.

"Saviors do this?" Dean asked, though it seemed a foregone conclusion.

This was no run-of-the-mill salt n' burn, but plenty of things liked to fool around with old corpses. Not that dried-up cadavers were in particularly short supply these days. This wasn't random. Gravedigging was hard, backbreaking work; Dean would know. Taking the trouble to do it in the middle of all *this*? No, this was more than just a petty "fuck you."

"Lord above." Tammy's voice was soft but her eyes were as hard as steel as they traced the trails of disturbed earth. "This is too much, even for them."

"Who'd they dig up?" Dean asked, and his frown deepened when no one answered.

The survivors glanced at one another. Whatever it was, they seemed awfully hesitant to share. Dean was more than ready to press the issue, but the approach of heavy footsteps demanded his attention. He spun around, snatching a discarded shovel off the ground, nausea rising with the quick motion.

He exhaled sharply when he saw that it was Daryl, striding toward them with a survivor hanging limp in his arms. The woman was unconscious, her long dark hair spilling over his arm, her face buried in the crook of his neck. Daryl's teeth were bared, and his face was flushed with something more than exertion.

Unfortunately, they hadn't come alone. A whole trail of walkers was shambling after them. There was no time for heartfelt reunions. Dean swung the flat of a shovel into one walker's face just as it lunged for his friend's back, the impact cracking like thunder. Beside him, Eduardo thrust his spear forward with precision, quickly dispatching another.

Their luck, it seemed, had finally hit its limit. The trickle became a flood, the dead swarming from every direction; front, back, left, right, and even *up*, plunging out of the shattered windows of the burnt-out mansion. They soon found themselves surrounded. “Hold the line!” Dean barked, sweat streaming down his brow, his arms shaking with the strain of pushing back the tide. “You’ve made it this far! Make it a little longer!”

Suddenly, a sharp whistle sliced through the air, followed by a dull *thud* as something landed beside them, erupting into a dense cloud of thick, gray smoke. Through the swirling haze, Jesus appeared, his long hair whipping around his face as he launched into a flurry of spinning kicks and backflips. “Come with me!” he urged breathlessly.

“Where the hell have you been?” Dean snarled, already falling into step behind him.

The dead stumbled through the haze, their snarls urgent and guttural, as if they could sense their prey was still within their reach. But the smoke bomb had disoriented them, throwing them off the trail just long enough for Jesus to carve a path and usher the group down a set of heavy, reinforced doors. Beneath the ruins of the Hilltop mansion, the air was heavy and stifling, thick with the acrid stench of smoke. It burned the back of Dean’s throat, forcing him to smother his coughs into his sleeve.

Dean’s leg buckled on the final step. Pain lanced through his body as he crashed, shovel flying from his grip, hands slamming forward to break his fall, the gritty concrete tearing at his palms. The shovel hit the ground with a sharp, reverberating clang. Dean scrambled after it, cursing without breath, and pinned it to the ground before the noise could bring the horde on their heads.

Eyes watering from the smell of smoke, Dean raised his head and squinted into the darkness. “Sam?” he called hoarsely.

Thin light streamed from tiny holes in the ceiling, but he couldn't make out much beyond the dark spots that swam in his vision. He pulled himself to his knees with a stifled groan, and nearly startled when a hard hand landed on his shoulder.

“You’re too warm,” Tammy made it sound like an accusation. Her dry palm found his forehead. “Did you get bit?”

“Yeah, by a bullet,” he grunted, swatting her hand away. “I’m fine. Don’t worry about it.”

Somewhere in the room, someone mumbled ‘all clear’ and immediately, flashlights snapped on, illuminating the space in jittery, uneven light.

“Sam?” Dean tried again, shielding his eyes from the sudden glare.

The hideout was packed to the brim with survivors, those who’d come in with him and many others more, all crammed into the narrow underground shelter. People lay sprawled on the ground or sat huddled together, their faces etched with exhaustion, many bearing visible injuries.

Low murmurs threaded through the stifling air. "...didn't have a choice," someone whispered, shaky and defensive. Another cut in, sharper, tinged with bitterness: "...left us for dead." A child's soft whimper, followed by a hurried, soothing hush. Nearby, a quieter voice murmured, "...they're in the halls now, just above us."

"He's not here, Dean."

He caught the low murmur of Jesus' voice, and his head whipped around so fast it sent a twinge through his neck. He found Jesus kneeling beside Daryl by the far wall, gently laying the injured woman onto a thin mattress. A flashlight dangled above their heads from a wire, made into a makeshift spotlight, and a medical kit lay open on the ground next to them. Jesus glanced up at Dean from across the crowded shelter, their eyes meeting briefly before he tilted his head, motioning him over with a subtle nod.

Teeth clenched, Dean found the strength to stand. He dragged his weary body across the shelter, finding the wall and sagging against it as he sank back down to the ground. He had *questions*, but then he saw the look on Jesus and Daryl's faces and forced himself to bite his tongue for just a moment longer.

At first glance, he assumed the young woman was merely banged up, but when he spied the crusted blood pooling at her neck and the heavy black rings around her eyes, he grimaced. He saw how Daryl hovered over her, inspecting her injuries, tremors running through his frame in intermittent waves. His nostrils were flared, and his jaw was clenched so tightly his teeth likely ached. Dean had never seen him so angry, like a coil on the verge of snapping.

Dean pulled his head out of his own ass long enough to ask, "Who is she?"

"*Tara,*" Daryl said in a strangled voice, with the weight of *family* behind it. "Found her in one o' them trailers. *Inside a bathroom*," Daryl bit out, his speech clipped and loaded with emotion. "Only reason I even looked was 'cause they left *a fucking note*."

He reached into his pocket and yanked out the actual piece of paper. It was pink, with a small butterfly logo in the corner. It read: '*Save her if you can*' and beneath that *'I'm sorry'* underlined three times.

Dean felt a wave of disgust, glancing down at the beaten young woman. *Well, as long as they felt bad about it…*

Jesus blinked hard, and it might've been the reflection in the dim light, but his eyes looked a little glossy. He inhaled sharply before he leaned forward on his knees, reaching down to cradle Tara's head. He gently turned her swollen face to the side, brushing the stiff hair back, exposing the awful wound in her head that was clotted with blood and debris. Bone fragments were tangled in the dark strands, along with fleshy chunks that had no business being out in the open like that.

Jesus' hands stilled. "Oh," he whispered softly. With careful hands, he gently lowered Tara's head back to the ground.

She was still breathing, but it was clearly just a matter of *when*, not *if*.

Head wounds had been tricky enough in the old world, back when hope still rested in hospitals humming with expensive equipment and over-caffeinated staff. But that world was gone, and hope was just another thing they'd lost along the way.

Nonetheless, Daryl went tearing through the medical kit. He pulled out a bottle of saline, only to toss it aside with a snarl when he realized it was empty. The tube of antiseptic fared no better, squeezed flat, utterly useless. The bag was a graveyard of empty packages, a handful of bandaids, and not a damn thing that could help her.

"Daryl…" Jesus started to reach for Daryl's shoulder but then seemed to think better of it, letting his hand fall back to his side.

Daryl slammed the useless medical kit to the ground. "The hell's she even doing here, man?" he asked, voice rough. "How'd those assholes get the drop on you?"

"A lot's changed since you've been away," Jesus said, sitting back on his heels. "We've worked with Saviors before. It's… it's complicated." He hesitated, his eyes flicking to the side, his expression making it obvious he didn't want to say much more in the crowded space. "You didn't see it," he continued. "When I got in, the fire… we barely managed to contain it. We couldn't have done it without them."

Dean spread his hands wide, gesturing around them. "Yeah, that sure worked out *great*." He dropped his hands with a scoff. "Jesus, where the hell is my brother?"

First Cas, now Sam – Dean kept having to turn to Jesus for answers. The irony wasn't lost on him.

"He's alive," Jesus said after a moment's hesitation, and Dean could practically hear the 'but' hanging in the hair. He braced himself for bad news as Jesus continued, keeping his voice low, "Someone saw him being carried into one of the evacuation vehicles. They said Dr. Carson went with him."

"*What?*"

Someone across the room shushed him, but Dean barely registered it. Startled, Jesus pressed a finger to his lips, shooting a sharp, pointed glance at the ceiling, where the dead shuffled restlessly above their heads.

"I expect they'll reach Alexandria before nightfall," Jesus added, wringing his hands in his lap. Daryl's head snapped up to stare at him. "They'll bring back help."

It was as if a needle had scratched across the record in Dean's mind. "Back up," he said hoarsely, thinking he must've heard it wrong. "You mean Alexandria? *That* Alexandria?"

"We debated between Alexandria and the Kingdom in case we had to go through with the evacuation plan. The Kingdom's closer, but it would mean cutting through Saviors' territory. We couldn't take that risk." His expression was nearly apologetic as he turned to Daryl. "Alexandria will come through for us, Daryl. Like I said, a lot's changed in the past few

months." His smile was faint, tinged with sadness. "We were preparing for this possibility, you know. I just never thought it would actually happen."

Jesus' eyes closed briefly as he hung his head, breathing deeply as if to steady himself. "The first demolition blast took us all by surprise," he said quietly, eyes squeezed hard. "People… well, they panicked. It happened so fast that… you must've seen how it was out there. They set the rest of the charges and piled into whatever vehicle they could find. Some got out, most didn't." He paused, expression pinched. "We think some of the Saviors reneged on the truce."

"Yeah, *no shit,*" Daryl snarled. "Ain't like the walkers came at Tara swinging a fucking crowbar."

The young woman let out a soft whimper, her face twitching briefly, but she didn't wake. Daryl leaned in cautiously, his movements careful as he touched her arm, murmuring her name in a low, gentle voice. Jesus watched quietly, his hands clasped loosely in his lap.

"Saviors must've stolen some of your rides. What makes you so sure Sam's with your people?" Dean asked, his throat tight. "Just how bad was he?"

"I don't know," Jesus admitted, his pale eyes soft with quiet sympathy. "But I know he made it out alive, and he's with Dr. Carson, so he's in good hands, at least."

Dean's breath rattled in his chest. "But you didn't *see* him?"

"No, but *he* did." Jesus' gaze shifted across the dimly lit shelter, landing on a body in the corner, a jacket carefully draped over its head and chest. "He was just a kid. Sixteen." Jesus let out a sound that was almost a laugh. "He said your brother saved his life."

All Dean could muster was a dull, numbing detachment at the sight of yet another dead body. People died in terrible, gruesome ways all the time now. It was easier when they were strangers. "Did he say anything else?"

"No, nothing." Then, after a hesitant pause, Jesus added, "Just that Sam's been evacuated with our people. That's what Calvin said, right before he died: 'Our people. It was our people.'"

Just then, a wave of agony pulsed through Dean's head, and the edges of his vision blurred. He sagged against the wall, his fingertips pressing hard against his temples, as if he could claw out the pounding headache threatening to split his skull in two.

Damn it, Sam, he thought viciously, *I told you to watch your damn back.* He wasn't just angry – he was furious. At his brother for cutting shady deals; at himself for not stopping him.

But then he realized something. Something important.

Sam was going to Alexandria.

Cas was in Alexandria.

"Dean?" Jesus asked, voice tinged with concern.

Okay, no, this was good. This was really, really good.

It occurred to him that he could ask Cas to haul ass to the Hilltop right away, because a friend of a friend needed saving. He almost opened his mouth to do it (and screw whoever overheard) because he'd never quite trusted the *frequency of prayers*, or whatever Cas called it, without speaking the words out loud.

But if Jesus was to be believed, Cas had been in Alexandria for these past few weeks, nursing his wounds or whatever. He said that Cas had been unconscious for *days* and that it had been bad enough that *literal children* thought he'd needed protecting. It'd only been a few days since Dean had lost the compass, but until then, he'd been checking it on the daily, bleeding himself raw for the sake of the ritual. He *knew* Cas hadn't budged in weeks. And when had Cas *ever* stayed put, unless something was seriously wrong?

What if Sam was worse off than Tara?

The little voice in the back of Dean's mind played out: *You don't get to choose who deserves to be saved. Do your damn job.* But also, just as firmly: *Family comes first.* And above it all: *Look after your little brother, boy.*

No, Cas needed to stay in Alexandria. If Sam was hurt, Cas would take care of him.

"*Dean*," Jesus repeated, more urgently now, "Are you okay?"

"Could use an Advil," said Dean, realizing he'd been sitting there with his fingers pressed to his temples like a friggin' jedi. "Or a drink if you got it." He stifled a laugh, his eyes stinging. Whether from pain or relief, he couldn't quite tell. "Jesus, you beautiful son of a bitch. You're a goddamn genius, you know that?"

Jesus raised an eyebrow, clearly thrown by the abrupt shift in Dean's mood. "Did you hit your head on the way in?"

"No, dumbass," Dean huffed, though a faint grin tugged at his lips. "My brother's gonna meet Cas in Alexandria. If he's got the juice to scramble your circuits, he can probably help Sam." Or at least keep him alive until Dean got there. Damn it, they *both* better be okay.

Jesus went oddly still, a flicker of unease flashing across his features. "Oh."

"Seriously, you're fine," Dean assured him, resisting the urge to roll his eyes. He'd nearly forgotten how much Cas freaked Jesus out. "Coulda been worse. Still got your peepers, don't you?"

Jesus did not seem all that reassured. At the same time, Daryl was watching them both with a kind of cautious scrutiny. Fair enough, Dean supposed. Magic spells and Dean's charming personality aside, the angel thing was a lot.

Not wanting to waste any more time, Dean staggered to his feet, his hand instinctively finding the wall to steady himself. He wasn't stupid; he knew he'd been pushing himself too

hard, that his injuries left him open to infection. But damn it, it was the bottom of the ninth – he could push himself just a little bit longer.

“By nightfall, you say?” Dean asked, doing his best not to let his discomfort show.

Jesus startled, snapping out of his thousand-yard stare. “What, Alexandria?” he replied, frowning. “It’s only a few hundred miles, but the roads can be tricky. They should be fine, as long as they steer clear of the highways and avoid passing through Dufresne.” He paused. “Hang on, you’re not thinking about going after them, are you?”

“What tipped you off?” Dean said dryly. “Just point me in the right direction.”

Jesus’ mouth twitched. “Sorry, Jack. This Titanic’s fresh out of lifeboats.” He gestured broadly at the shelter. “Why do you think I brought everyone here? Until help comes, none of us are going anywhere.” His gaze swept over Dean, and he added wryly, “Not unless you’re planning to walk.”

“If that’s what it takes,” Dean said, shifting his weight to ease the pressure on his bad leg. “So, you're gonna draw me a map, or what?”

“You’re joking, right?”

Daryl answered before Dean could. “He’s serious,” he said, his voice gruff as he frowned at Dean, scrutinizing him like he was trying to see what was holding him together.

Dean inhaled sharply. “Maybe I wasn’t clear,” he said, his tone edged with impatience. “I don’t need an escort – just for you to tell me how to get to Alexandria.”

“I’m not going to do that,” Jesus said slowly, staring up at him like he was missing a few screws. “Dean, you look terrible. I’m sorry, but no. You won’t make it to Alexandria, not on foot. I won’t have your death on my conscience.”

“Are you– ugh, *fine*,” Dean snapped, cutting himself off with an exasperated glare. “Daryl?” he said sharply.

Daryl didn’t answer right away, giving him a long, hard look. Finally, he shook his head. “No,” he decided flatly. “He’s right – you look like shit.”

Fucking *unbelievable*.

“What the hell is wrong with you two?” Dean demanded, his voice tight with barely restrained frustration. “You’re just gonna sit here and wait for the damn cavalry to show up?”

For the first time, Jesus looked genuinely angry. “Look around you,” he said in a low, controlled whisper. Rising to his feet with practiced grace, he leaned in close, his breath warm against Dean’s face. “Do these people look like they’ll survive out there? Are *you* planning to carry them? Because let’s be honest - you’re barely standing yourself. Maybe we should just leave everyone here to die.”

Dean stared back coolly, his jaw flexing as he held Jesus' gaze. "What makes you so sure anyone's even coming?"

"Rick won't let us down. *Maggie* won't let us down," Jesus replied without hesitation. Then his gaze dropped, and he added, somewhat less confidently, "And… Sam will tell Castiel you're here, won't he? That's one more reason." He bit his lip, clearly fighting through his discomfort. It was obvious that Cas still scared the crap out of him. "Think about it logically," Jesus said, softly now, "Hilltop is still chock full of resources. Someone will come for us, one way or another."

Though they kept their voices quiet, eyes were still on them. The shelter was packed with survivors – most of them too young, too old, or too injured to move far. The ones who hadn't made it to the lifeboats in time. The air was thick with the sour tang of sweat and fear, coupled with the heavy scent of smoke.

Even if they somehow managed to sneak everyone out the door and through Hilltop – coated in walker stew, exposed to infection – the journey to Alexandria would be a massive undertaking. It wasn't just the distance; it was the sheer impossibility of keeping so many vulnerable people safe on the road.

Dean's gaze flicked toward the ceiling as the faint sound of shuffling drifted down to them. "Can't wait here till the roof caves in. So what's your plan?"

"Hopefully, help will come sooner rather than later. Maybe tomorrow, if they're willing to risk driving through the night. But you're right. We have to take care of that herd one way or another." He was about to say more, but a faint mumble from the woman lying on the ground beneath them caused his expression to stutter. Inhaling sharply, Jesus dropped to his knees, taking her hand in his with quiet care, murmuring her name.

Daryl hadn't left her side at all. "You're one tough sonuvabitch," he said gruffly, his hand gentle on her shoulder. "You gonna pull through, you hear me?"

As her friends tried to coax her back to consciousness, Dean's gaze drifted to the hanging light above them, swaying faintly from Jesus' sudden movement. He reached up and steadied it with his hand, then leaned back against the wall, settling in to keep watch.

Tara's lashes fluttered unevenly, her face pale as paper beneath the beam of light, except for the dark rings that framed her eyes. Her left pupil was wide and blown, the other shrinking to a pinprick. Her gaze wandered past Daryl's shoulder, unfocused. "Oh… it's you," she slurred, her lips twitching into a weak, crooked smile. "Long… time…"

"Long time," Daryl agreed, his voice cracking as he took her hand.

Tara blinked slowly. Her hand twitched weakly, brushing at empty air before falling limply back to her side. "Long time…" she mumbled again, stuck like a broken record. "Long… long time…" Her eyelids drooped again.

Daryl's breath hitched. "Hey, no, look at me," he whispered urgently, lightly tapping her cheek. "Come on, asshole. Stay with me. Stay awake."

Eyes closed, Tara lay still under the light, a faint ghost of a smile on her lips. Her breathing seemed steady, almost easy, and for a moment she looked peaceful. But then her body jerked violently, her head snapping back as her limbs stiffened. Her eyes bulged so hard that the blood vessels in her right eye burst, red flooding the white.

“Don’t restrain her!” Jesus whispered urgently, stopping Daryl mid-reach. Daryl jerked back, his face stricken, as Jesus quickly slid his hands under Tara’s head, cradling it gently to keep her from striking the hard ground. Guttural, choking noises rose from her throat, eerily close to the dead’s haunting groans.

Daryl stayed crouched on the other side of her, his shoulders hunched and tense. “Tara,” he whispered harshly as she continued to spasm. A tear slipped from his eye, landing on her pale cheek. “Come on, girl.”

The entire shelter watched the harrowing scene unfold. Tammy’s lips moved in silent prayer, her expression bleak. Her whispers tangled with the sounds of Daryl’s ragged breathing, the dull thuds of Tara’s limbs hitting the ground, and the faint, wet rasp of her choking gasps. Somewhere in the crowd, a terrified voice muttered something about “shutting her up,” and Dean could only hope Daryl was too preoccupied to hear it.

After what felt like an eternity, Tara’s convulsions stopped. For a moment, they all breathed a sigh of relief. But that relief was short-lived.

Tara's chest rose one final time before falling still with a rattling exhale. The last of the tension slipped from her body.

And just like that, she was gone.

Dean watched Daryl out of the corner of his eye, seated beside him on the hard ground, their backs pressed against the cold, cracked wall. They’d sat there for a while.

Arms slung loosely around his knees, Daryl’s head dipped slightly forward as he stared at the covered body a few feet away. He spun his pocket knife around and around in his hand, fresh drops of blood scattering across his already stained jeans.

“At least it was quick,” one of the survivors offered hesitantly. Dean felt Daryl stiffen beside him, his grip tightening on the knife, but he gave no other indication he’d heard.

Eventually, Jesus wiped his face and pushed himself to his feet, graceful as ever despite the invisible weight that seemed to press down on his shoulders.

“Friends,” Jesus said, his voice just louder than a whisper, carrying through the shelter. Heads turned toward him, flashlight beams following. “I know we’ve all lost a lot today. I know you’re scared, and I know you’re tired, but there is still work to be done. Help is coming, but until then, we’re on our own.”

“There’s nothing left,” a woman said, her voice haunted, like she’d seen her last shred of hope ripped away.

“There’s still us,” Jesus said, taking a step forward. “We’re stronger together.” His gaze swept over the crowd of weary faces. “We have to take back the ground.”

“You want us to fight?” someone asked from the back of the room, their voice sharp and bitter. “I’ll go up and fight, yeah. Just as long as we send *them* out first.”

“That’s not how we do things here.” Jesus’ voice carried a hint of admonishment, like that of a disappointed –if not entirely surprised– parent.

“Maybe we *should*,” came the harsh rebuttal. Dean squinted, scanning the dimly lit crowd, but he couldn’t pinpoint the speaker. The man continued, his voice sharp and biting, “God knows we wouldn’t even be here if it weren’t for them. We should’ve killed ‘em all when we had the chance.”

“Or maybe we should’ve left you all to burn,” a long-haired man snapped back in response, leaning forward slightly from his perch on the ground, teeth bared in an ugly sneer.

“Justin, shut up,” another man growled, his voice sharp and commanding as he turned a scowl on the long-haired man beside him. Bald and hard-faced, he had a dangerous edge about him, a grimness that radiated quiet authority.

“What, you cool with this, Gary?” Justin hissed in response, raising his bound hands. “After we saved their asses? We–”

Gary surged forward, bashing his forehead into Justin’s nose, cutting his whining with a resounding *crack*. Blood spattered across the floor as Justin reeled back, clutching at his face with his bound hands, a groan of pain escaping his lips.

“I said *shut up,*” Gary repeated, low and dangerous.

At the same time, Daryl shot to his feet, rage flashing across his face. Like Dean, he hadn’t noticed before that the group sitting slightly apart had their hands bound – and that they weren’t Hilltop residents at all. But of course, Daryl would’ve probably recognized them by their faces anyway, if he’d bothered to look before. He’d spent enough time as the Saviors’ prisoner, after all.

Well, shit, Dean thought, wincing as he dragged himself up the wall and onto his feet.

Under normal circumstances, this would’ve been the part where everything got *loud*. Had they been anywhere but an underground shelter with an undead herd threatening to buckle the ceiling, there probably would’ve been screaming, people would’ve been shouting, making threats. But as it were, Daryl’s lunge across the room was eerily quiet, broken only by the survivors’ scrambling out of his way, and Dean’s hissing, “*Daryl, wait*.”

But Jesus was quicker, planting himself before Daryl. It was like standing in the path of an angry bull. “No,” Jesus said firmly. “They surrendered.”

The noise that rumbled out of Daryl’s throat was barely human. “*Move*.”

“I said no,” Jesus repeated, his voice steady. “This isn’t the way.”

Frightened, stifled gasps rippled through the cramped shelter, barely audible over the sound of Daryl's harsh, labored breathing. Though he was on his feet, he was anything but still. His entire frame seemed to vibrate with barely restrained aggression as he stepped in close, bringing his face inches from Jesus', his shoulders taut, fists curling at his sides.

"You brought them here?" Daryl demanded in a harsh snarl, somewhere between a shout and a ragged whisper. *"After what they did?"*

"It wasn't them," Jesus spoke calmly, not moving an inch. "They were on fire suppression duty, nowhere near–"

It was Daryl who threw the first punch, but Jesus was ready. He ducked under the swing with practiced ease, using Daryl's own momentum to his advantage. A sharp shove sent Daryl stumbling, his boots scraping against the hard ground. He caught himself just before losing his footing, baring his teeth in frustration, his breath coming sharp and ragged.

Jesus held out his hands, palms open, still blocking Daryl's path to the Saviors. "I know you're angry," he said calmly, voice low, "but they're unarmed and restrained. I don't like it anymore than you do, but" –he hesitated, shoulders rising slightly in an unconscious defensive motion– "we still need them."

"Listen to your boy there, Daryl," Gary cut in, his tone carrying an air of familiarity. He sat with his back against the wall, heavy brow lifted in faint amusement, like the whole thing was some private joke. "Like it or not, we're in this shit together."

"You shut your damn mouth," Daryl snarled, spittle flying.

Above them, something heavy toppled over. The sudden crash sent a jolt through the cramped shelter, and everyone jumped. Eyes darted to the ceiling as dust sifted down, catching in the smoky, stale air. The dead continued to shuffle above, inside what was left of the mansion, their dragging feet creaking against the weakened floorboards.

"Don't you get it, man? It wasn't us," Gary said then, softly and chillingly calm. He lifted his bound hands slightly, gesturing toward the other Saviors seated around him. "We're stuck down here, same as you. Whoever did it, they fucked us too. As far as I'm concerned, the deal still stands. Save the town, save ourselves."

"Well, ain't you a helpful little ray of sunshine," Dean drawled, deciding it was time to step in. All eyes turned to him as he pushed off the wall, masking the limp in his step with a deliberate swagger. He shot Daryl a wink, unbothered by the flash of teeth he got in return, as long as Daryl stayed put.

Gary gave Dean a slow once-over, a smirk tugging at his lips. "Sam's brother, right?"

"Guilty as," he replied smoothly, staring down the bound Savior. "See, I was just wondering – how'd the joint end up needing saving in the first place?"

"Funny you should ask." The Savior's smirk widened briefly before he pressed his lips together, stifling it, his expression settling back into something unreadable. "You know, we

didn't come here to cause these people any grief. Simon just wanted *him*. Hilltop didn't have to be part of it, but your brother didn't have to play hero, did he?"

Anxious glances darted about, and not all of the scowls seemed reserved for the Saviors. Dean, however, knew exactly what Gary was trying to do, and he wasn't impressed. "Whatever you say, chuckles," he shot back with a smirk. "I'm sure the whole body-snatching thing had absolutely nothing to do with it. Just a fun little coincidence, right?"

For the first time, Gary looked less than completely self-assured. "We didn't do that."

"Bullshit," a voice interjected from the other side of the room. It was Eduardo, the young guard who'd fought alongside Dean earlier. He stood with his arms crossed, his voice sharp with anger. "It's all about *her*, isn't it? You want her rattled. But this? Digging up her dead husband?" He gestured harshly, his lip curling in disgust. "You people don't have a soul between you."

"What's he talking about?" Daryl growled, his voice low and dangerous, like a rumble of distant thunder. There was something in his tone, like he was starting to piece it together, but didn't want to believe where it was heading.

"Everyone, please stay calm," Jesus urged in a low voice. "Daryl…" he hesitated, unsure of how to proceed.

"What the fuck is he talking about?" Daryl demanded, voice cracking.

When Jesus answered, it was nearly too soft to hear. "It's Glenn and Abraham," he said, shaking his head in dismay. "They took them."

For a long moment, Daryl stared back in stunned silence as if the words hadn't fully registered. His gaunt face, hollow and haggard from his long captivity, seemed to lose what little color it still held. His lips parted slightly, and for a brief moment, it looked like he might speak – but no sound came. His mouth trembled.

And then came the rage.

The sound that came out of Daryl wasn't something any of them would soon forget. Raw, visceral, and eerily smothered, like a roar that had been strangled in his chest, escaping instead as an animalistic growl that sent a cold shiver down spines and made the hairs on the back of necks stand on end.

This time, Jesus ducked out of the way as Daryl launched himself at the Saviors. Dean wasn't as quick. He took the full force of Daryl's shoulder slam, the impact knocking the breath from his lungs. Wheezing, he staggered back, pain radiating through his chest as unfamiliar hands reached out to steady him.

But the moment Daryl's back was turned, Jesus moved in with practiced speed. He rushed after Daryl, twisting fluidly to sling an arm around his neck. The two crashed to the ground in a tangled heap, landing squarely on top of a Savior – a sweaty, round-faced man – who struck out wildly with his bound hands.

“For fuck’s sake,” Gary was huffing, sliding up the wall and onto his feet, backing away from the near-silent scuffle. “He’s gonna get us killed.”

Even while choking in Jesus’ hold, Daryl was single-minded. He drew his knife and drove it into the sweaty Savior’s leg. The man’s mouth opened in a howl of pain, but another Savior was quick to react, slapping a bound hand over his mouth to smother the scream. Before Daryl could make another move, a third Savior managed to kick the knife from his grasp, sending it clattering across the ground with a sharp metallic ring.

“Calm down,” Jesus hissed into Daryl’s ear, arm locked tight around his neck. No one screamed, but the air was thick with choked gasps and the dull thuds of Daryl’s elbow driving back into Jesus’ ribs – once, twice, three times, each resulting in nothing but a muffled grunt, the grip around Daryl's neck remaining firm.

Above their heads, the dead continued to roam, oblivious to their presence. Not for long, though. Not if it didn't stop.

“Hey, *hey*,” Dean hissed, looking for an opening. “Come on, that's enough.” When Daryl’s eyes began to flutter, Dean made his move. “I said that's *enough*,” he growled, wrenching them apart.

In the space of a breath, Jesus had leaped halfway across the cramped shelter, where he leaned forward subtly with his knees slightly bent, every muscle poised to strike again if needed. At the same time, Daryl was sucking in harsh, shuddering breaths as he rolled onto his hands and knees. Dean threw a glare in Jesus’ direction for good measure, more out of a sense of camaraderie than anything else, but stayed next to Daryl, one hand pressed firmly to his shoulder to steady him, while also making sure he stayed *down*.

“You good?” Dean asked quietly, angling his body to shield Daryl from the Saviors’ view as much as possible.

The glare Daryl shot back made it clear he was anything but, thank you very much.

“I don’t know exactly what’s going on with you right now,” Dean said, his voice low enough not to carry in the crowded, stifling room, “but I got you, alright? I got your back. That hippie over there” –he gestured to Jesus, who shot him a look– “he’s got your back, too. But he’s right. You gotta *calm your ass down.*”

In response, Daryl’s body tensed like a coiled spring, but before he could move, Dean shoved him back down, his fingers digging firmly into Daryl’s shoulder.

“Knock it off,” Dean hissed. “You can’t fly off the handle like that, not in here, not now.” His tone sharpened as he added, “That’s how you get people killed.”

For whatever reason, those words hit home. They cut through the haze of Daryl’s anger, freezing him, his breath stilling for several long moments. Sensing the shift, Dean relaxed his grip on Daryl’s shoulder.

Gary seemed to think it was a good idea to speak up again. “We didn’t come here for the dig, either,” he said, his voice carrying an edge of defensiveness. “I guess the guys didn’t wanna go home empty handed.”

“Some souvenir,” Dean said with a huff. “Next time, try the gift shop.” Beside him, Daryl slowly rose to his feet. He didn’t move toward the Savior this time, but the tension in his body was palpable, his jaw clenched tight.

“I hear you, it’s fucking weird,” Gary agreed easily enough, his tone light. “But the guys were just following orders. Negan said to bring home a few stiffs, didn’t say which ones... just so long as they were coming out of the ground.”

“Why?” Dean asked, eyebrows raised.

Gary shrugged. “The big guy gives you an order, you don’t ask questions. You say, ‘Yes, Sir,’ and do as you’re damned told.”

“So Daddy says *jump*, and you’re already out there scouting for the nearest cliff?” Dean asked incredulously. With an exaggerated eyeroll, he added, mockery heavy on his tongue, “What’s next – he makes you kneel every time he walks by?”

There was a beat where no one said anything, just long enough to feel uncomfortable. Daryl gave a sharp inhale through his nose, while Gary’s perpetually smug expression faltered, sliding into something that could almost be called ruffled.

“Seriously?” Dean asked flatly.

“Yes,” Daryl rasped in a low voice, still staring at the Saviors like he was two seconds away from gouging out eyeballs. At least that was a quarter-second improvement.

“Well, that just sounds exhausting,” Dean huffed, rubbing his forehead as the pounding headache behind his eyes hit full force. He dropped his hand with a sigh. “Seriously, what is *wrong* with you people? Why does nobody know how to just be normal anymore?” The words rushed out, his voice quiet and raspy. “What, you spend your days going up and down like a friggin’ game of Whack-a-Mole? When do you even get anything done? ‘Oh, hold up, Steve, boss is coming – better hit the floor.’ *Come on.* That’s just really bad for your knees.”

Toward the end of his rant, Dean’s throat clicked painfully, and he leaned down, gripping his knee as he stifled a cough as quietly as he could. It was Daryl’s turn to whack him on the back, if somewhat awkwardly.

“Fucking cults, man,” Dean rasped, straightening slowly and rubbing at his throat.

The Saviors were glaring daggers at him, though Dean swore some of them looked embarrassed. Only Gary was watching him with a faint crease in his brow. “Do I know you from somewhere?” he asked, faintly puzzled.

A heavy thump echoed from the entrance, where one of the dead had likely stumbled against the doors. The sound was enough to set off a little boy, maybe five or six, who let out a sharp,

frightened wail. His cry was cut short as the frantic woman beside him clamped a hand over his mouth, her eyes wide with panic. Everyone froze, holding their breath. Upstairs, another thump reverberated, the dead growing more agitated – shuffling, bumping – but after a long, tense moment, they quieted.

"They'll get in sooner or later," someone whispered, their voice tight with fear.

"Not if we take them out first," Jesus said. He paused, letting his gaze sweep across the room. "If we want to survive, we *have* to fight."

Daryl was still watching the little boy, his cries muffled behind his mother's trembling hand. Then his gaze shifted to the Saviors. A storm of emotions flickered across his face – anger, disgust, and something harder to name. This time, when he moved toward them, it wasn't with blind fury but with slow, deliberate intent. In one smooth motion, he swept his knife off the ground and reached over, grabbing Gary by the collar.

Jesus moved to intervene, but Dean stopped him. "Wait."

"Do what you gotta do," Gary said, meeting Daryl's gaze evenly.

Daryl cut the bindings on Gary's hands.

"None of this makes us square," Daryl warned, his voice low and deadly. "Any one of yours steps outta line, tries *anything*" –he raised the tip of the knife to Gary's eye, his stare unwavering– "I'll cut your eyes out and shove 'em down your throat." With a final scoff, Daryl flipped the knife and thrusted it against Gary's chest. Startled, Gary grabbed it, his hand curling instinctively around the hilt.

"Now that's out of the way," said Jesus, his mouth twitching slightly in relief. He turned to address the group at large. "Let's get started."

Even with the added numbers of the Saviors – minus the one Daryl had stabbed in the leg – the dead still outnumbered them significantly. But with the right strategy, they had more than a fair shot at this.

While Jesus laid out the battle plan, detailing choke points, ration distribution, and weapon caches, Daryl pulled Dean aside. "Sure you're up for this?" Daryl murmured, looking him up and down, his gaze lingering on Dean's injured leg. "Maybe you should sit this one out."

Dean snorted. "Oh, sure," he said, flashing a grin that didn't quite reach his eyes. Every inch of him ached, his leg screaming with every shift of weight, but he forced himself to stand straighter. Mind over matter, and all that. "I'll just grab a lemonade and cheer you on from the sidelines. Sound good?"

"Don't bullshit me," Daryl rasped, eyes narrowing into slits.

Dean rolled his shoulders with a wince, brushing it off like it was nothing. "Made it this far, didn't I? Fought worse with less. You don't get to bench me, man."

Daryl stared at him, long and hard. “Just don’t fucking die out there.” He shook his head, muttering under his breath, “I ain’t explaining that to your guy.”

Chapter End Notes

So many misconceptions! Poor Dean is running on bad intel.

Would you kindly leave a comment? ❤️

Score One for the Catholics

Chapter Notes

PREVIOUSLY:
Father Gabe is settling into the hard knock Sanctuary life. Rosita is there too. Castiel is a tad peeved.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The concrete floor was hard and unforgiving beneath Gabriel's knees. The position was familiar, though the dull ache in his back left him unusually stiff. Hands clasped before his heart, he lifted his face to the simple wooden cross fixed high on the wall.

Somewhere in the depths of the Sanctuary, a ghost began to wail, and the tapered candle at Gabriel's knee flickered out, plunging the room into darkness. He breathed in the icy air as he prayed.

Before, Gabriel had doubts. "I'm not asking to live," he remembered whispering, kneeling in his old church back in Alexandria. "You've given me redemption. And it's that which makes me no longer fear death. What I fear… is a fruitless death."

Alexandria felt like a distant memory now, just like everything else beyond the confines of the Sanctuary. He could still recall the scent of dew in the air, the first rays of sunlight filtering through the arched stained-glass window. How his voice had trembled when he'd prayed for guidance.

Gabriel no longer feared a fruitless death.

A familiar whistle soon caught his attention, drifting in from the hallway outside. He stilled, waiting, listening. The door groaned open behind him, its hinges dragging out a long, grating creak, and dim light spilled into the room. For a moment, Gabriel held his gaze to the man's looming shadow, cast ominously against the wall.

"Is it time?" Gabriel asked softly, tilting his chin just enough to glance over his shoulder.

Negan chuckled low in his throat as he leaned back against the open door frame, the barbed baseball bat dangling loosely from his hand. "Not yet," he said, his smile full of teeth. With a lazy twist of his wrist, he rolled the bat's handle around and around. "Soon."

Gabriel closed his eyes, shivering. He then drew himself to his feet with little grace. Slightly hunched, he reached over to pull back the curtains on his window. Beyond the crisscross of transparent plastic tape, the world outside lay smothered in white shadow, spilling its eerie glow into the room.

Time flowed strangely, here in the Sanctuary. The fog had stolen the turn of the earth from them, sweeping away the sun and the stars, leaving behind only an endless, eternal stretch, as if they were caught at the center of a black hole. Though months seemed to slip away, their world stood still, the seasons unchanged save for the occasional frost that heralded the presence of ghostly apparitions. No one escaped the Sanctuary. Not in life, and not even in death.

Gabriel gazed into the emptiness for a long moment. “I understand,” he sighed, turning his back to the window.

Ghostly cries drifted through the overhead pipes and air vents. Two men rushed past the open door, brandishing shotguns loaded with what Gabriel assumed were rock salt rounds. They hesitated, pausing as if to kneel in deference, but Negan dismissed them with a casual flick of his gloved hand.

A warm smile tugged at Gabriel’s lips. “You’re looking well.”

Negan snorted and slicked back his hair, now a little more salt than pepper. He was overdue for a haircut. “Well, *you* look like shit,” Negan responded, eyeing him carefully. “Back still giving you trouble?”

“I’ll live,” Gabriel shrugged, then grimaced as his back gave a particularly cruel twinge. He’d managed to strain it in the most mundane way – lifting something heavy.

“Mmm hmm,” Negan hummed, clearly unconvinced. He reached into his leather jacket and pulled out a jar half-filled with a bright yellow balm. “Gotcha a lil’ something-something from Frankie’s stash. Girl’s got your back.” He snickered at his own pun. “Literally.”

Gabriel opened the jar and took a tentative sniff. “That’s very kind of you,” he managed, coughing lightly at the sharp scent of menthol.

“Don’t mention it,” Negan said, waving him off. “You sure you don’t want Frankie to take a pass at you? She won't mind.” He gave Gabriel a once-over and grinned. “I don’t know if you’ve ever had a deep tissue massage before, but it is *awesome*. Better than sex. And that’s coming from me.”

Gabriel shook his head firmly. “That’s not necessary.”

“Gabe,” Negan said sternly, his eyes boring into Gabriel’s. “We need you at a hundred percent.”

“I know,” Gabriel said, clutching the jar to his chest. He couldn't help but feel embarrassed, throwing his back out in the middle of all of *this*. Eager to change the subject, he asked in a slightly joking tone, “How's the fort holding up?”

“Moderately haunted,” Negan huffed, slinging the baseball bat over his shoulder, letting it rest against the back of his neck. He seemed entirely unconcerned by the barbed wire hovering dangerously close to his skin. “Same shit, different *whatever*. I’m heading down to check on the workers,” he said, and looked at Gabriel critically. “You feel up for it?”

“Of course,” Gabriel replied earnestly.

Coming to the Sanctuary had shifted Gabriel’s perspective in many ways. Before, he never would've imagined *this*, following the man who’d killed Glenn and Abraham as if it were the easiest thing in the world. But somewhere along the way, Negan had become something other than an enemy.

He became *a mission*.

Gabriel no longer feared a fruitless death, that much was true. Now, he worshipped only in gratitude, for the Lord had answered his prayers.

He had been called to serve. Here, among the lost and the plunderers.

Without clocks, the rising sun, or the change of seasons, the people of the Sanctuary had become unmoored. The swirling whiteness illuminated their lives with its strange, ominous glow, leaving them stranded inside a timeless void. People roamed the halls like restless phantoms, in wait for the next alien attack, caught in a state of perpetual exhaustion and terror.

Nightmares haunted them all, and Gabriel was no exception – every time he closed his eyes, those familiar voices, *coward,* screaming, begging, dying, *you’ll burn for this* – but others seemed to fare far worse than he. Blood-curdling screams had become disturbingly routine, echoing through the metal walls and rusting pipes of the Sanctuary.

For some, even the waking world offered no escape, their nightmares bleeding into reality before their open eyes. It wasn’t uncommon to find someone cowering in a shadowed corner, begging for mercy from something only they could see, or another raking jagged, bloodied fingernails across their skin, carving deep grooves into flesh, fighting against a crawling itch only they could feel. There was no escaping the fog – it seeped everywhere, even inside their minds.

Yet, the people endured.

Even as nerves frayed, tempers flared, and spirits waned, the Sanctuary persevered.

Because of Negan.

Gabriel helped, of course. He listened and advised, offering prayers and counsel to all those who sought him out, but it was *Negan* who held them together, rallied them, and lent them his courage in the face of this terrible nightmare. Though he’d witnessed Negan’s arrogance and his cruelty, he’d also grown to believe that, through this ordeal, something in Negan was beginning to change.

Negan was a man wrapped in contradictions. He demanded his people kneel before him, yet spent hours by their sickbeds. He used foul language as punctuation, yet spoke Latin with effortless fluency. He had terrorized entire communities, but could speak passionately and at length about what it meant to save lives.

And apparently, he was also *immune*. Gabriel remembered asking point-blank if those particular rumors were true.

Negan had rolled his eyes, yanked off his boot, tugged down his sock, and pointed to the faded imprint of teeth on his ankle. “Son of a whore lurker hiding in a puddle,” Negan had stated, then turned halfway and lifted his shirt to reveal another scar along his flank. “One of those creepy silent ones.” Before finally tugging at his collar to expose a faint mark near his neck. “Nadine,” he added with a grin and a salacious wink.

These none-days, Negan often invited Gabriel along on his tours through the besieged Sanctuary. For morale, he claimed, but Gabriel viewed it as his chance to plant seeds, one conversation at a time. Maybe Negan didn’t see it yet – maybe Gabriel himself didn’t fully understand it – but there was purpose here. There had to be.

Every man deserved a chance at redemption. And if Negan could change, if he could lead not with fear but with strength and compassion, then maybe the Sanctuary could change too. Gabriel had to believe that.

“Regina got into the sage again,” Negan mentioned as they strode down the corridor toward the front hall. “You know, the kind that smells like cat piss?” He sighed, irritation flickering across his handsome face. “Convinced she’s some kind of born-again psychic now. Thing is, burning sage doesn’t do shit except scare off the rats. Now I’ve got people moaning over losing their protein.”

“Should I talk to her?” Gabriel offered.

“Nah. I’ll handle it.”

“Regina is just trying to feel safe,” Gabriel reasoned. He paused on the platform overlooking the bustling front hall and gestured subtly. “Negan, your people look up to you. Please think before you punish them for being afraid.”

“Now, who said anything about *punish*?” Negan asked slowly, eyeing him curiously.

As if on cue, the entire compound began to shake. Gabriel grimaced, clutching the platform’s railings tightly as the violent tremors shook the structure. Beside him, Negan did the same. Cries of alarm rose from below them as people braced themselves, gripping whatever they could reach.

When the shaking finally subsided, Gabriel straightened with a wince, pain radiating through his back. It had only been a minor assault, but everyone was already on edge, and it didn’t take much to tip the balance. They’d had far too many suicides as of late.

Negan didn’t hesitate. Moving swiftly, he threw himself into the thick of it, alternating between soothing and commanding, smoothing things over with his usual confident swagger. People gravitated to him, their despair lifting as he spoke. His charm was a balm to their wounds, his smile an anchor in the tide.

“Do you see what I mean?” Gabriel asked softly, his voice low as Negan crouched to speak with Olga, one of their oldest residents and the mother of a soldier stationed at a distant Saviors’ outpost. “You’ve been given a second chance. A chance to become the leader your people deserve.” He hesitated for only a moment before adding boldly, “The leader I believe you can be.”

Despite the dark bruise blooming across her cheekbone from her fall, Olga seemed at ease, though her hand clutched the edge of Negan’s leather sleeve as if it were a lifeline. Negan smiled at the old woman as he gently pried her hand away. He slowly turned that same smile on Gabriel, but his eyes hardened, and when he motioned Gabriel aside with a crook of his gloved finger, Gabriel swallowed reflexively.

He relaxed when Negan’s expression softened into amusement. “How many times do I gotta tell you?” Negan asked, his dimples deepening. Lowering his voice to keep the conversation private, he added with a knowing smirk, “People are a resource.”

“Is that all they are? Truly?” Gabriel asked, exhaling softly as his gaze swept briefly across the hall. Many faces had turned their way, watching them intently. “Negan,” he continued, his tone earnest, “you don’t have to be the man you were before.”

Negan held his gaze. “Do tell,” he said dryly.

“Someone who only saw people as a resource to exploit,” Gabriel explained, a quiet challenge in his voice. “A man who let his past define his future.”

“Wow.”

“The kind of man who didn’t believe he could be anything more,” Gabriel continued with growing confidence. “You’re better than that. I know you are.”

“Well, shit,” Negan said, a low chuckle rumbling in his chest. “Look at you, peeling back all my layers. You got me all figured out, don’t you?”

“I truly believe that God is in all of us, guiding us,” Gabriel said, his lips curving into a gentle smile. “He’s inside of you too.”

“A little rapey, but okay.”

Gabriel ignored the barb. “You know the difference between right and wrong. All I want for you is to do right by these people. I know you want that too.”

All traces of amusement drained from Negan’s expression. He leaned in and landed a heavy hand on Gabriel’s shoulder. “It’s not just about me, though. Is it?” he asked, his voice low and serious. “What about you, Gabriel? Are you going to do right by these people? Are you strong enough?”

Gabriel’s tongue dried in his mouth. “You know I am.”

“Are you really?” Negan’s eyes narrowed, his gaze probing. “Because when the time comes – and it’s coming, I promise – you’re gonna have a job to do. You’re the only one who even

stands a chance. Power like that…" He sucked a sharp breath through his teeth. "That *thing* out there is not some bottom feeder demon, do you understand that?"

Gabriel squared his shoulders. "I'm not a coward." Not anymore.

Negan's grip on his shoulder tightened. "Everything's riding on you. Everything. I need to know you've got what it takes. Because if you don't…"

"I do," Gabriel said firmly. If he had to face the literal forces of evil, he would do so with unwavering faith and resolve. "I won't let you down."

Negan studied him for a long moment, his expression unreadable. Then, slowly, a smile spread across his face. "Damn right you won't."

The evil outside the Sanctuary never slept. It taunted them, its whispers curling into their ears in a thousand distant voices.

"I sought the Lord, and he heard me, and delivered me from all my fears," Gabriel murmured faithfully, standing tall under the concrete threshold that led out into the yard. The whispers were louder here, swelling like a chorus in the everlasting shroud of white mist, but with the Word as his shield, Gabriel turned a deaf ear to their unholy murmurings.

"What do you think?" Gabriel asked, shifting aside to make room for his companion, though the threshold was plenty wide.

Alden hummed in thought, rocking lightly on the balls of his feet as he gazed out into the white void. He was a young man, barely out of his teens, with tousled blond hair and a lean frame, who always seemed to carry a faint air of awkwardness about him, as if adulthood hadn't quite settled on him yet.

"I have a good feeling about today," Alden decided.

"Define 'today'," Gabriel teased, the corners of his eyes crinkling. The days at the Sanctuary weren't long – they simply weren't *days*.

"Oh, that's easy," said Alden, flashing a crooked grin. "I go by my shaving schedule."

Gabriel's brow furrowed slightly. He couldn't recall ever seeing Alden without his short, scruffy beard. Alden wiggled his eyebrows, his gaze flicking downward suggestively.

A surprised laugh escaped Gabriel, bursting free and loosening something deep within him. This reaction seemed to be exactly what Alden had been aiming for. He ducked his head with a sheepish chuckle, looking immensely pleased with himself.

Still smiling, Gabriel raised his fingers to his lips and let out a sharp whistle, signaling to the others that it was safe to step outside and tend to the gardens.

It was the most remarkable thing. Despite the lack of natural sunlight, the lack of rain water, and the constant otherworldly assaults upon the Sanctuary, the once-barren compound had

miraculously blossomed into a lush, thriving oasis. Grass sprouted through cracks in the concrete, vines wove themselves around rusting metal pipes, and trees shot up at an astonishing pace, bearing yields as tempting as the forbidden fruit of Eden.

For the longest time, no one dared touch the abundance. The fruits lay where they fell, rotting on the ground, untouched and left to decay, while vegetables and grains were ignored entirely. But as the stores ran dry – days, weeks, or months slipping by, impossible to measure – their rations dwindled, their bodies weakened, and their choice became singular:

Survive.

"Perhaps," Gabriel had taken to reflecting aloud before his growing congregation, "the earth beneath the Sanctuary has awakened not because of the fog, but in *defiance* of it? Perhaps we've been offered a path to salvation, a chance for us to see that we can be better than we once were?"

Occasionally, a well-meaning individual would pull him aside after the sermon. "Not everyone appreciates this kind of insight," they'd warn him. Gabriel would smile warmly, thank them most graciously for their thoughtful concern, and assure them that Negan himself had encouraged him to speak freely on matters of faith and salvation.

The truth was, before the fog, the Saviors had sustained themselves by way of fear and intimidation, taking what they wanted from other communities. Now, they were left to fend for themselves. Soldiers and workers toiled together, side by side, with even Negan occasionally stepping in to help – a gesture that only deepened the growing admiration of his people.

Of course, stepping out into the fog always required a certain degree of caution. The malevolent force lurking beyond could strike without warning. For the moment, however, it was peaceful.

"I'm so goddamn sick of this Silent Hill bullshit," the man beside Gabriel muttered, his trowel tearing into the dirt with savage strokes.

Gabriel smiled. "You say that every time, Dex."

All Dex could manage was a heavy sigh as he reached up to tug the red bandana from his head, wiping his face with it. The few strands of hair he had left were long and stringy, plastered to his balding scalp in sparse, uneven patches. The deep lines etched into his face made him look as though he'd aged decades since the day he'd loaded Gabriel onto his bike and stole him away from Alexandria.

"Dex?" Gabriel said, lowering his own trowel. He reached over to grasp the man's shoulder. "Are you okay?"

"Don't think so, Padre," Dex murmured. Lifting his hands to his face, he stared at his dirt-caked palms like he was searching for something. "It's the hands… I keep seeing their *hands*..." His voice faltered, and he shuddered before trailing off into silence, his eyes glazing over with that all-too-familiar, distant stare.

“You haven’t been sleeping, have you?” Gabriel asked gently.

Dex chuckled. “That obvious, huh?”

“Why don't you head back in and get some rest?” Gabriel suggested. “I can finish up here.”

Dex offered a weak smile and gestured to his empty basket. “I know you strained your back last time. Doesn’t sit right with me, making you pick up my slack.”

Before Gabriel could assure him otherwise, Alden cut in. “Don’t worry about the spuds,” he said, sliding Dex’s empty basket closer to his own. “Seriously, it’s no trouble. You should go rest.”

Then, as if struck by a thought, Alden reached into his pocket and pulled out a small plastic tube. “Maybe this’ll help,” he said, dropping it into Dex’s hand. “Found it in my trunk when I was cleaning earlier. Honestly forgot I even had it.”

Dex’s eyes widened. “Are you serious?”

Alden rubbed the back of his neck, smiling sheepishly. “Don’t get too excited, it’s just dry weed. But hey, it might take the edge off.”

“Thanks, Al,” Dex said hoarsely, wiping his eyes with the back of his hand. His smile was full of gratitude. “I won’t forget it.”

Alden waved him off. “Just get some sleep, alright?”

“You’re a good man, Alden,” said Gabriel once Dex had left. In the time they’d spent together, Gabriel had come to know Alden as an earnest and hard-working young man, always willing to extend a kind word or a thoughtful piece of advice.

Alden glanced up, his hands buried in the soil. “What, for dealing?” he joked, a crooked grin tugging at his lips. Then he shrugged, but his expression shifted, growing weary as a sigh escaped him. “We’re all in this together, right?”

For a second, it seemed like he had more to say, but then seemed to think better of it.

They continued to tend to the garden in companionable silence, Gabriel watching Alden from the corner of his eye. He knew that Alden had been the sole survivor of a brutal attack on a Saviors’ outpost, just before the fog. A fact which left Gabriel feeling all kinds of ways, considering his own participation in a similar assault on yet another Saviors’ outpost, something that now felt like it’d happened a lifetime ago.

They worked until it was no longer peaceful, until the scent of rain wafted through the air. Once, it would have filled Gabriel with joy, but now, it sank his stomach like lead.

Somewhere in the distance, a sound like a cathedral bell chimed, growing louder with every passing second. Shadows began to bloom inside the fog, tall, ominous pillars that seemed to writhe and pulse with each toll. Gabriel forced himself to look away, retreating with the others back inside the Sanctuary, lest he succumb to their siren’s call.

They'd already lost too many.

People often asked Gabriel why he became a priest. More recently, they asked why he remained one. His answer had always been the same: he loved God, he loved people, and he wanted to bring them closer together. He once believed, like many in the Episcopal Church, that Hell was a metaphorical moral void, a state of complete separation from God's love and grace.

All he ever wanted was to help people – not by sowing fear of eternal damnation, but by restoring their faith – in God, in themselves, in each other, and in the goodness of the world.

The rising of the dead had compelled Gabriel to question his beliefs. Since then, he'd learned courage, he'd learned strength, and yes, he'd learned to kill. He had relearned his faith.

The dead still roamed out there, in the fog beyond the Sanctuary's fences. He could hear them sometimes, their rasping breaths, their dragging footsteps. The ones the Saviors kept penned had grown silent, too weak and emaciated to do more than rattle their chains, staring with dull, yellowish eyes. Monstrous, but no more evil than bacteria. Violent, but devoid of intent, malice, or any semblance of free will.

True evil, he had once believed, could only come from humanity. That belief had held firm until he came to the Sanctuary. Until he stood before the black-eyed demon, witnessed its slaying, smelled the stench of its sulfur. Until he bore witness to the horrors of the fog.

Hell was more than just a metaphor. It was a tangible realm, and its denizens walked the earth – not mere symbolic manifestations of humanity's greatest sins, but actual malevolent entities wielding power beyond imagination.

People like *Negan* had spent their lives fighting those things, while people like Gabriel had willfully turned a blind eye.

But no more. Now, Gabriel knew the truth: Hell was real. And it was coming for them.

Score one for the Catholics.

There was, of course, the Work.

"You wanted to see me?" Gabriel asked, rapping his knuckles on the door of Victor's study.

He'd been summoned. Or, technically, someone had nudged him at the end of the not-quite-afternoon prayer circle to deliver Victor's message. Any request from the Englishman always seemed to carry the weight of a royal summons.

Gabriel wondered what Victor wanted this time – Gabriel's blood, his blessings, or something different altogether. The work they were doing was important, Negan assured him. Gabriel no longer questioned that, though he had to admit that working with Victor had been, well, *challenging*.

As a rule, Victor had little tolerance for questions, and he grew visibly irritated at any attempt to start a conversation. Once, in a *rare* moment of divulgence, Victor had mentioned that the Sanctuary had been ensnared inside something he called an "isolated chrono-temporal distortion field." Adding, with his customary sneer, that it was "-rudimentary, really. Time is malleable, you understand."

Gabriel, who wasn't a Trekkie *per se* but had been known to dust off his Starfleet uniform for Halloween services at his old parish, had offered "warp bubble" as an alternative. Victor responded with a look of pure disgust before retreating to his journal, sipping his scotch with an air of morose finality.

Even after all this time, Gabriel didn't know what to make of the man. He knew that Victor belonged to a subgroup within the Saviors' hierarchy, the ones who called themselves *Hunters*, though there appeared to be no love lost between him and the rest of them. Victor had a talent for inspiring disdain in just about everyone he met – including *Nonna*, the sweet, elderly worker who fussed over everyone as if they were her own misbehaved grandchildren.

Since the fog, the man had been utterly consumed by his research – whatever that meant – and his temper had only worsened, leaving him frayed at the edges and prone to sudden outbursts.

Gabriel bore it with grace. Mostly.

"Victor," he sighed, doing his best to keep his irritation in check. The man had yet to even acknowledge his presence. "What can I do for you?"

"Yes, yes," Victor huffed in annoyance, barely sparing Gabriel a glance as he gestured toward the table, where a carton box and an empty chrome bowl awaited. "Fill that bowl, would you? I'm running low on table salt." With that, he turned his attention back to glaring at his whiteboard, marker poised mid-air like a weapon.

Gabriel peered into the box, his brows drawing together. "You're joking," he said flatly, holding up one of the tiny salt sachets.

Victor gave a haughty sniff. "Your help is most graciously appreciated."

Sighing, Gabriel dragged out a chair and began the monotonous task of emptying individual salt sachets into a bowl, one at a time.

They worked in markedly *un*companionable silence. Victor's study was a mess as usual, a chaotic jumble of odds and ends. Books and journals stacked in precarious piles, papers scattered across tables or shoved into any available nook or cranny, boxes of various paraphernalia scattered about. A two-seat sofa occupied one corner, though only one person could sit on it; the other half was always buried under a pile of something or another.

About halfway through Gabriel's pile, Rosita appeared. Thinner than before, with dark shadows under her eyes, but still just as strikingly beautiful as ever.

She paused in the doorway when she spotted Gabriel, but to his utter surprise, proceeded to stroll in like she'd done it a hundred times before, going to stand directly beside Victor at the whiteboard. He didn't notice her at first, too caught up in his work. Once he did, he startled and released an embarrassing squawking sound.

Flushing a deep crimson, Victor cleared his throat. "What do you want?"

Unperturbed, Rosita shifted her weight to one hip, a smirk tugging at the corner of her mouth. "How's the art project coming along, Vic?"

"It's my *research*," Victor muttered indignantly, still blushing to the roots. His gaze flickered nervously between her and the whiteboard. He cleared his throat again. "And I told you not to call me that."

Gabriel's hands slowed, his task forgotten as he watched the scene unfold with helpless curiosity. He'd never seen Victor so… *flustered*.

"Research," Rosita echoed, imitating his accent, somewhere between teasing and dismissive. Her gaze drifted to the whiteboard. The entire thing was covered in a chaotic tapestry of Post-it notes and red marker scribbles, mathematical equations interwoven with intricate sigils. "What did you call this stuff again? 'Ookian'?"

"How many times do I have to tell you," Victor said brusquely, like he was talking to a child. "It's Enochian. Ee-no-kee-an. If I didn't know any better, I'd say you were doing this on purpose."

Rosita laughed, a light, teasing sound that only deepened the crimson flush on Victor's face.

Gabriel stared for a moment before his eyes widened. "Wait, Enochian?" he asked, looking at the drawn sigils with newfound perspective – and excitement. "Is that what this is?"

Of course. That explained so much. How else could one hope to fight demons, if not through the language of the divine?

Gabriel exhaled sharply, his voice tinged with awe. "I've read about it, but I thought it was just a myth. How–"

"Quiet," Victor snapped, cutting him off. "I don't have time to entertain your delusions. It's part of my research. Now, get back to work."

"*So bossy*," Rosita said, smirking as she tucked a strand of hair behind her ear, then reached over and plucked one of the pinned notes from the whiteboard. Victor yelped and made a grab for it, but she simply turned her back to him, holding the note just out of reach. Victor froze, hovering awkwardly, as if the mere thought of touching her – even accidentally – was some unspoken boundary he dared not cross.

"Where'd you learn this stuff, anyway?" Rosita asked, raising an eyebrow as she looked over her shoulder. She smirked. "Did Negan teach you?"

“Negan? *Negan?*” Victor nearly shouted, aghast. “Are you out of your mind? Woman, to my *considerable* knowledge, I am the *only* human being on this entire godforsaken planet who is fluent in Enochian. *Actually fluent!* Not just blindly retracing arrays like some kind of… trained monkey!”

“Really?” She held the note between her fingertips, as if daring him to take it.

“Yes, really,” Victor huffed, snatching it back.

Rosita let out a soft, amused exhale. “Doesn’t look all that complicated.” She picked up another marker and began to copy one of the sigils.

Before she could finish, Victor slapped the marker clean out of her hand.

“Quit mucking about,” Victor groused, flushing under her heavy-lidded stare. He waved a hand over the whiteboard. “Enochian is a multi-dimensional language, woven into the very fabric of existence. You can’t even begin to fathom the sheer complexity of it.” He inhaled sharply, his frustration evident. “It’s the language of *creation*. Each sigil, each array, is an equation – a key to manipulating reality. A coding language, if you will.”

He paused, his gaze narrowing as a smirk tugged at his lips. “Do you even know what coding means?”

She raised an eyebrow. “Ones and zeros?”

“Congratulations, you’ve seen the Matrix,” Victor huffed, rolling his eyes. “Yes, ones and zeros – *of the known universe.*”

Rosita tilted her face slightly, then stepped closer. She leaned in as if to examine the whiteboard, but stopped just short, close enough that Victor could likely feel the ghost of her breath against his skin.

Victor’s throat bobbed visibly.

“You paint a little picture and change the universe?” she asked in a tone that could almost be described as *intimate*.

“Of course not,” he said, clearing his throat. “You, uh, you need a source of power. Obviously.” His eyes darted from the whiteboard to her, then back again.

Rosita, meanwhile, was watching him – just him.

“You see, some of the simpler forms can draw energy passively, via cosmic radiation or through, uh, etheric emissions from the, uh… well, you’d call it the Veil. It’s really the bridge between, um–” Victor paused abruptly, an uncharacteristic hint of shyness crossing his face. “This must be boring for you.”

“I like hearing you talk,” Rosita said, her lips curving slightly.

“Well,” Victor said, somewhat breathlessly, “what you have to understand is that it firstly boils down to *intent*...”

He continued at a breakneck pace, diving headfirst into a torrent of terrifyingly complex terms about the linguistic structure and applications of Enochian, and how it could be harnessed to bend reality itself. Gabriel listened in silent amazement, his own task all but forgotten.

By the time Victor trailed off, he was swaying slightly on his mismatched feet, likely feeling the strain of standing too long on his crude prosthesis. His gaze dropped to the floor, as though embarrassed by his own outburst.

Rosita hummed her appreciation. “Vic, this is really interesting,” Then she leaned in slightly, her voice dropping to carry an almost conspiratorial edge. “But it’s very… academic, isn’t it?” She scrunched her nose. “I mean, at some point, Negan might start wondering if you’re just dragging this all out.” She gestured toward the sigils and equations. “All this research… and yet, here we are.”

“Negan doesn’t understand any of this!” Victor blurted, eyes wide. “None of them do! I’ve been trying to tell them; there’s *no such thing as magic*. It’s science, pure and simple, but they don’t want to hear it.” His hand drifted to a pendant at his neck, which he rubbed distractedly. “Obviously, I need more time to finish my research. And materials, which, of course, I can’t *get* because we’re *stuck* here. And as long as Negan dallies–”

He clamped his mouth shut, as if suddenly realizing he’d said too much.

Rosita’s eyes gleamed with sudden interest. “What do you mean, Victor?” she asked, a little too sweetly.

Victor flushed. “That’s none of your concern,” he said urgently, his voice tight. He gestured sharply toward the door. “You’ve wasted enough of my time. Go, get out. I told you – *I’m busy.*”

When Gabriel found Rosita later, she was perched on a walkway above the main hall, her legs swinging idly over the ledge. A notebook rested open across her lap, and as he approached, his eyes caught on the intricate lines of a half-finished sigil sketched on the page.

His mind was still reeling, awed by everything he’d heard. “How did you do it?” Gabriel asked, leaning against the railing with his arms folded. “Get Victor to open up like that? He barely even looks at me.”

“He’s easy,” Rosita said with a shrug. “He wants you to know how smart he is.” She paused, smirking as she glanced sideways up at Gabriel. “But it helps to have boobs.”

Gabriel ducked his chin and let out a quiet snort of laughter.

Snapping the notebook shut, Rosita turned her gaze back to him, her voice dropping to a low murmur. “About what he said…” She hesitated, her eyes narrowing slightly as she studied Gabriel. “What do you think that asshole’s up to?”

“Victor?” Gabriel asked, frowning.

She gave him a flat look.

“Oh,” he said, understanding. “You mean Negan…?” Gabriel shook his head lightly. “Nothing, Rosita. Victor was just being… Victor.” He hesitated before adding, “Listen, we’re all on the same side here. The *human* side. It’s not like Negan’s keeping us trapped. If anything, he’s the one holding this place together.”

Rosita looked at him with pity. "Damn," she sighed. "He got you good."

Chapter End Notes

Gabriel: I can change him 🥺

You guys, I’ve lost control. I've LITERALLY lost the plot. I can't even see words anymore, guh. I trimmed like 10k words and still had to break what I initially planned to be one chapter into three. This is, um, part one. I’m aiming to get the next two out to you in the next few days after a bit of spit n' polish. Stay tuned because we're about to enter the era of "finding out".

Big sorries for being so behind on my replies! I love you all so much. You, especially! xx Love to hear what you have to say. ❤️

The King's Speech

Chapter Notes

PREVIOUSLY:

The Sanctuary is trapped in a time bubble and besieged by a supernatural fog monster. Spooky, spooky Cas. Good Father Gabriel is cozying up with the Saviors, becoming buddies with Negan (what could possibly go wrong) and Alden (a plucky young man who hands out pep talks and weed) (remember when Dean and Daryl first got together and murdered an outpost? Alden remembers).

Yes, I'm alive! Sorry, folks. I was going to post this chapter back in January but I took on this new job and, well, it's been stressful. If I screw up, people might actually literally die. Which is insane, because I'm a fucking data analyst. Anyway, sorry to keep you waiting. Please enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

They were called to gather in the Sanctuary's entrance hall. Gabriel was heading toward his usual spot among the workers when Arat, one of Negan's chief lieutenants, caught him by the elbow.

"He wants you by his side," Arat said, her tone as sharp and brisk as ever.

"He does?" Gabriel responded, pleasantly surprised. When Arat shrugged, he caught a glimpse of a new tattoo, a sigil of some kind, peeking from under the strap of her tank top.

The hall filled quickly in anticipation of Negan's arrival. Unnatural light filtered through the clear tarp stretched across the broken windows, casting a dull, muted glow over the expanse. As he ascended to his new vantage point atop the concrete platform, Gabriel surveyed the growing crowd.

Just like always, the workers took to the floor, while the soldiers and those higher in the pecking order joined Gabriel on the platform or positioned themselves along the metal walkways. It was plain to see that many of them were still reeling from the latest savage savage attack on the compound. The disconcerting scent of ozone still lingered in the air. Gabriel offered a reassuring smile to those who met his gaze, and took note of those who avoided it.

There was Victor, watching from the office window across the hall, an expression of mild distaste on his face. Rosita and Laura stood on one of the walkways, their arms pressed together despite the ample available space. He spotted Alden among the workers below, slouching slightly with his hands tucked into his pockets.

A frown tugged at Gabriel's brow when he realized that a certain teenager was absent. Normally, the boy would've been let out of his basement room for one of Negan's public speeches. Under the careful watch of his guards, of course.

By Negan's orders, very few had been allowed near the boy – fewer still permitted to speak to him – for fear that any of the hapless, terrified souls in the Sanctuary might be tempted to take matters into their own hands.

It was a harsh but necessary precaution. After all, every one of them had heard the call. Not in *words*, but in flickering images, in feelings and compulsions – seeping into their minds as nightmares, riding the wind, erupting in bloody rashes on their skin. They all knew exactly what the *creature*, the nightmare that stalked them from the depths of the fog, desired above all.

It wanted the boy.

Whether the creature sought to corrupt the boy or use him as a pawn in some unholy scheme, no one knew. But even as death encroached upon the Sanctuary's halls, Negan refused to yield to the creature's demands – refused to condemn a mere teenager to what was surely a fate worse than death. And as much as Gabriel was loath to admit it, a part of him admired Negan for his unwavering resolve.

A sudden hush fell over the hall, pulling Gabriel from his musings. No matter their station, from the lowest ranking worker to the most esteemed commander – like falling dominos, the people of the Sanctuary dropped to their knees. Gabriel, long accustomed to kneeling in prayer, felt that familiar twinge of unease as his knees met the concrete floor – not before God, but for a man.

But something was different. The weight of Negan's steps fell unusually heavy as he approached the edge of the platform, relinquishing Lucille to one of his men without ceremony. He had a somber air about him, almost muted. Gone was the boyish grin and rakish, easygoing flair.

For once, Negan looked his age.

The people waited, kneeling, the silence becoming more pronounced with each passing breath.

Finally, Negan spoke: "Stand up."

For a moment, no one moved. Then, hesitantly, they clambered to their feet, the rustle of clothing and creaking joints feeding the tense atmosphere. All eyes were on Negan, waiting on his word.

"My Saviors," Negan began, and there might have been a tremor in his voice. "You don't kneel for this."

A lump formed in Gabriel's throat. For what reason, he could not say.

“I owe you all an apology,” Negan said gravely, gazing down at his people. It might have been a trick of the light, but for a moment, his eyes seemed to glisten. “You trusted me when I told you that we are the future. You trusted me when I told you that we are strong enough to bring this world to its knees. And you trusted me when I told you I’d keep you safe.” Negan lowered his eyes and sighed. “But I can’t protect you from the truth.”

The audience stood shell-shocked, hanging on his every word. No one shifted or even dared to breathe too loudly.

“I thought I could protect you from it,” Negan confessed. The corrugated metal walls carried his voice to every corner of the hall, the light from the insulated windows poured over him like a celestial spotlight. “I thought I could handle it without dragging you all into my past. Told myself you didn’t need to know – that if I carried it, you wouldn’t have to. I let you believe in the world I built because I needed to believe in it too. Convinced myself I was protecting you.” A heavy sigh passed his lips. “I was a fool.”

His words resonated in ways no one could ignore. Though the reactions were small, they were telling – hands rising to cover trembling lips, fingers wiping away stray tears. It was unsettling to see Negan like this. So beaten down, so humbled. So very human.

“I forced you to be strong,” Negan continued softly, his gaze sweeping over the crowd as if marking each of them personally. “Stronger than every other group out there, even if it meant killing a few to save the many.” He straightened, shoulders rolling back. “I put that burden on you, but I never told you why.”

His voice dipped lower; every single person in the room leaned in, drawn as if by some Pavlovian instinct.

“Why us?”

Silence.

Gabriel could only breathe.

“For years, you’ve lived by my rules,” Negan continued in a murmur, shaking his head slightly. “Without question, without reservation. Even when it didn’t make sense to you, even when it cost you more than you thought you could give. You did it because you believed in me.” Negan exhaled, his eyes squeezing shut for a brief moment. “I made you believe in me.”

He spoke the words like a confession.

“You must’ve wondered why I chose this place, this rusting heap of iron and steel, to be our Sanctuary.” Negan gripped the railing tightly, yellow paint flecking beneath his black gloves. “Why did I make you carve symbols into the doors, paint sigils on the walls? What's behind the silver, the old books, the animal bones?”

Then, as if a switch had been flipped, a bright, crooked grin lit up Negan’s face. “And *what* in the ever-loving-fuck is up with all that *goddamn salt*?”

The sudden shift caught everyone off guard. A few hesitant chuckles broke the silence, spreading as more people joined in, glancing at their neighbors in search of reassurance. The tension seemed to lift like a veil.

“I bet before all this, y’all figured ol’ Negan was just a little cuckoo for Cocoa Puffs.” Negan wagged his finger in mock admonishment. His grin widened as more laughter bubbled from the crowd, the corners of his eyes crinkling with amusement. He waited for the chuckles to fade before his expression turned serious once more. “Folks, it’s time I told you who I really am.” He gestured broadly with his gloved hand. “Who we are.”

“*We’re Negan!*” someone shouted from below. Other voices quickly joined in, echoing the cry.

With a single gesture, Negan commanded the crowd to silence. He drew a deep breath before speaking again.

“Once upon a time, I went to war,” he began with a smile that didn’t quite reach his eyes, the rawness in his voice betraying more than he meant to. Slowly, the smile faded. “And like all good soldiers, I went in knowing I might not make it out. Shit, I was ready for it.” He sighed. “Coming back, though? I wasn’t ready for that.”

Negan fell quiet for a beat, as if caught in some distant memory. Gabriel caught his gaze and offered an encouraging smile, a feeling not unlike pride warming his insides.

“It’s okay, we’re listening,” Gabriel murmured, his voice low enough for only Negan to hear.

“It was Hell,” Negan said slowly, holding Gabriel’s gaze, something unreadable in his expression. His mouth twitched, like he was remembering a joke no one else was in on, before he shifted his attention back to the crowd. “I came back, and my shit was so far from together, I didn’t even know where to start picking.” He tapped at his temple. “Just a whole ugly mess right here.”

Negan let his hand fall, a slow smile tugging at his lips. “But then I met someone – a real special lady.” A low laugh rumbled from him, his eyes crinkling at the edges. “All the king's horses and all the king's men couldn’t put me back together again, but my girl, she was a real go-getter. She saw something in me, something I thought I’d lost. Even after everything I did, everything I’d been through, she still believed in me.”

His voice softened. “So I started believing in me, too. Believed I deserved a fresh start. A clean slate. Believed I could be more than just what the world turned me into. That I didn’t have to be that guy anymore. That maybe… I could just stop.”

The crowd listened intently, hanging onto Negan’s every word. It was a story that could only end in tragedy. A familiar ache settled in Gabriel’s chest. He wished, just once, that it might end differently.

“So I stopped. And me and her, we carved our own little piece of something – worked shitty jobs, paid the bills, burned burgers at backyard barbecues, spent slow Sundays in bed. Just normal, boring, beautiful life… and I loved every damn second of it.”

For a moment, he looked like he was there again. His gaze turned distant.

“My apple pie life,” Negan murmured, almost to himself. “With a woman I loved, making plans for the future like we had all the time in the world. It was everything I ever wanted.”

His gentle smile slipped away.

“And then I lost her,” Negan said, his voice cracking on the last word before he lapsed into silence.

Gabriel wanted to reach out, to close the gap between them, to lay a comforting hand on the shoulder of a man who, despite everything, he was starting to see as a friend. But he thought better of it, keeping his hand at his side, unsure if his comfort would be welcomed.

“Hell,” Negan muttered, shaking his head slightly. “None of that makes me special, does it?” He leaned forward, his eyes roaming over the sea of rapt faces. “You know this story. You *are* this story. Which one of us hasn’t lost *everything* to this goddamn world?”

The crowd shifted slightly, echoing a murmur of agreement.

“This goddamn world,” Negan gritted out, menace creeping into his voice, “doesn’t let us pretend. That’s the good thing about it, is that it doesn’t let us forget. It’s an honest world. It reminded me who I really am.” His gaze swept over the crowd. “I’m a soldier. And my war was never over.”

He looked to the men and women lining the platform and walkways.

“People like me,” Negan said, letting the words land with purpose, each syllable measured and pronounced, “we can leave the battlefield, but it follows. It finds us, because it’s a part of us. People like me – we go out there, *we get our hands dirty*, and we do that, we carry that burden, so that our families” – he gestured to the crowd below – “can be safe.”

His expression hardened. “But you are not safe,” he said slowly, deliberately, his chest expanding with the effort of holding his anger, his loss, in check. “*You are not safe.* You have never been safe. Not now, not before, not ever. You just didn’t know it. Because people like me? We didn’t tell you. We thought we were protecting you. Because if you knew – if you knew what was really going on in your neighborhoods, in your streets, the war right under your *goddamn* noses…”

He let out a low, humorless chuckle. “The dead ones? That’s minor league. The nightmares I’ve seen… the ones I’ve spent my life hunting… they can think, they can speak, they can laugh… laugh when they snap their fingers and make you *pray* for the mercy of a ravenous herd. Laugh when they crawl inside your head, take control, use you to ruin someone else – someone you care about, *someone you love*. That’s what they do. It’s what they *are*.”

As if on cue, a faint tremor shook the compound, almost like an aftershock. Just enough to remind them of the danger beyond their walls.

Negan's voice turned deceptively soft. “I want you to imagine it,” he murmured. “What it’s like to be taken alive. To turn into a prisoner inside your own body. Feeling everything they do, *tasting it* – for years, maybe decades, maybe *centuries* – until there’s nothing left of you, not even a scrape of a soul. Just a broken husk, a half-lucid pile of meat, bone and regret.”

The audience stood frozen, the whites of their eyes stark against their gaunt, hollow faces.

Negan took in the crowd with a slow, knowing stare. “Take a good look around you. Look at the faces you know, the ones you trust. I want you to imagine it – what if it was them?”

All this time, Gabriel had been standing like a sentinel beside Negan, hovering uselessly in his clerical collar and beige cardigan. The urge to speak gnawed at him. He felt compelled to reinforce Negan’s message, to make himself part of this moment.

“It’s true,” Gabriel said, clearing his throat. He stepped forward, gripping the railing as he met the eyes of the crowd. “I’ve seen one. A demon with black eyes.” His mouth twitched with dry amusement. “At first, I thought Negan was just tormenting some poor, defenseless woman.” He turned to Negan, and suddenly, his tongue felt thick, his throat dry. “He showed me the truth.”

Negan brought a heavy hand to Gabriel’s shoulder. “Thank you, Father,” he said smoothly before leaning in, voice dropping to a murmur. “Do you smell that, Gabey?” he asked, his breath warm against Gabriel’s ear. “We’re almost done cooking.”

Frowning in confusion, Gabriel asked, “What do you mean?”

The grip on Gabriel’s shoulder tightened – hard enough to hurt. Then, with a low chuckle, the pressure eased, Negan’s hold shifting into a friendly pat before letting go. “We’ll catch up after,” he promised with a wink before stepping away, his focus shifting back to the crowd.

For a long moment, Negan studied his people. When he spoke again, his voice was low – yet it carried to every corner of the hall.

“Let me tell you about the thing that’s out there,” he murmured, shooting a pointed glance toward the windows and the swirling whiteness outside.

The crowd held its breath.

A slow smirk tugged at Negan’s lips. “You know how, now and then, you might notice a bug?” Ignoring their puzzled expressions, he added, “Like an ant or something. Just struttin’ by, minding its business, as one does, out on important bug errands, or whatever it is they do?” He paused for a moment, drinking in their confusion. “And then, for no reason at all, you just – squish it?”

He waited another moment before shrugging. “Don’t even think about it, do you? Hell, you probably don’t even notice. You don’t bother scraping it off your boot. You’re just walking around, dragging what’s left of its little body with the rest of the sludge in the cracks of your shoe.” His voice dipped lower, taking on a sharper edge. “I mean, who gives a shit? It’s just a goddamn bug.”

His eyes narrowed. When he spoke again, a snarl edged his voice. “That thing out there – when it looks at us, what do you think it sees? People? Or an *anthill*?”

A murmur rose from the crowd, low and anxious.

“Well let me just say – fuck that noise,” Negan huffed, shaking his head. “You wanna know what *I* see? I look out the window, and I see a snot-nosed punk ass *bitch* with a magnifying glass. That’s who I see.”

His lips curved into a slow, wolfish smirk.

“And what this bitch doesn’t know,” Negan all but purred, “what it *fails to realize*, ladies and gents, is I’m no *goddamn ant.*”

Gasps sounded through the hall as his hand slapped the railing with a resounding crack.

“I’m a motherfucking *murder hornet*.”

Gabriel’s heart drummed in his chest as he took a hasty step back, watching Negan begin to pace along the platform, his boots striking hard against the concrete. There was a palpable shift in the air, a simmering tension rising just beneath the surface.

“I’m the guy who spent his life going toe-to-toe with every putrid pissant bitch that ever poked its prick outside the pit,” Negan declared in a snarl as he moved with purpose, a swagger in the turn of his hips.

The energy in the hall pulsed, sweeping through the crowd like a tangible thing, shifting into something else, something *alive*. A sea of weary, terror-stricken faces – exhausted, beaten down – turned up with something close to reverence.

“I’ve faced things that make the dead ones look like fluffy, rainbow-shitting *Care Bears*. And I didn’t just kill the fuckers – I made ‘em beg for a one-way ticket back to Hell where they fuckin’ *belonged*.”

The murmurs from the crowd slowly rose to a rhythmic chant of *Negan, Negan, Negan*, feeding on itself, growing louder, fiercer. Gabriel found himself nodding along without realizing it, and when he did, his breath caught in throat.

Negan half-turned to them, never ceasing his relentless pacing. “I did that, all of it, not because I’m some *noble saint*,” he spat, “but because that’s what a motherfucker like me *does*.”

“Bless you, Negan!” a woman cried out, her voice trembling with reverence. “Thank God for you!”

“This fucking world and everything in it chewed me up and spat me back out. Yet here I am, motherfuckers. ‘Cause that shit only made me meaner, harder, and twice as nasty. Think you’ve had it rough? Think you’ve been dragged through hell? FUCK YOU. I clawed my way off the rack with my own goddamn ribs.”

The sound that rolled through the hall was like a storm of unrestrained fervor. Voices crashed together in wild, guttural cheers, fists pounding the air, boots stomping against concrete.

But then, somewhere in the back, a man let out a nervous, nearly hysterical laugh. It was barely a sound, but in the charged atmosphere, it stuck out like a gunshot. The man slapped a hand over his mouth, eyes wide, but it was too late. The crowd turned on him instantly, hissing quiet reprimands, shooting glares.

Negan stopped dead.

“Oh, think I’m full of shit?” His eyes glinted, sharp and hungry, like a wolf catching the scent of blood. “Cocksucker, I have killed things older than your goddamn religion. I’ve hacked, burned, drowned, gutted, skinned, flayed, and dismembered horrors that would’ve left you prolapsing out of your beady little eyeholes.”

Negan took a menacing step forward.

“WE ARE SAVIORS!” he roared. “You’re all here, standing with me on your own two goddamn feet because you fought through *hell and back* to be here.” His hard gaze swept over the crowd, his presence fierce and commanding. “It’s time to stop playing defense. Time to take the fight to that monster out there – and make it *pay.* Make it pay for every life it took, every friend it stole, every goddamn nightmare it left behind.”

Cheers and shouts reverberated through the hall like thunder. Negan let the moment build, let the fire take hold in their eyes before spreading his arms wide, his voice turning into a battle cry.

“If I’m going to war, I want every last one of you badass motherfuckers watching my back! BECAUSE WHO THE FUCK ARE YOU?” he bellowed.

“NEGAN!” they roared in unison.

He raised a gloved hand and the clamor instantly simmered down to a charged, uneasy quiet as people shifted on their feet in nervous anticipation.

“Are you?” Negan asked, his expression hardening. His narrowed eyes swept over the crowd. “Or are you *Widow?*”

The silence that followed was immediate and absolute, as if the air had been sucked out of the room. Gabriel felt a shiver crawl up his spine, though no ghostly presence stirred in the hall.

“Negan,” he whispered, leaning closer so his voice wouldn’t carry, his throat dry. “Perhaps, we could discuss this privately–”

Negan shot him a cutting glare.

Gabriel’s mouth clamped shut.

“This is real,” said Negan, turning his attention back to the audience, expression grim. “There’s a monster out there – hunting us, toying with us. It wants us weak. It wants us divided.” His voice dropped to a growl as he leaned forward, gripping the railing tight. “That’s not going to happen. Not on my watch. Anybody here not ready to stand with us?” He jabbed a finger toward the exit. “There’s the fucking door.”

No one moved. Going outside was a death sentence, and they all knew it too well.

Negan dropped his elbows to the railings and leaned his weight forward, his sharp eyes scanning each upturned face, as if he could flush out the *traitors* with his gaze.

“I’ll ask you again,” Negan said softly, eyes narrowed. “Who are you?”

“*Negan*,” they all chanted dutifully.

But then –

“Liar! He’s a – *get him!*”

A fight erupted on the floor, workers colliding in a blur of fists and shouts. Gabriel leaned over the railing, straining to make sense of the chaos. His breath caught as the crowd lurched and split apart, revealing Alden at the center of the commotion.

“Wait,” Gabriel breathed, watching helplessly as his young friend was dragged forward, swallowed by an enraged mob. “Friends, please –”

They shoved Alden to his knees at the base of the platform, his arms wrenched high behind his back. Before he could suck in a breath, a fist tangled in his hair and yanked his head at a punishing angle, forcing his gaze upward. Alden winced in pain as his back arched painfully, his body straining against the hand in his hair and the boot pressing between his shoulder blades, pinned like an animal.

Negan held Alden’s gaze, his expression unreadable.

On his knees, pressed from all sides by an angry mob, Alden’s voice trembled. “I’m Negan,” he pleaded.

A sharp scoff cut through the mob. Voices overlapped, hissing accusations. Then came the wet smack of spit, the warm glob landing squarely on Alden’s cheek, sliding down toward his jaw.

Appalled, Gabriel turned for the stairs, only to have Arat step into his path. He stared at her in disbelief.

“I’m Negan!” Alden insisted once more, raising his voice, struggling to be heard over the clamor.

“He’s with the Widow!” someone shouted.

Gabriel's stomach churned. His hands felt clammy. "Negan, *Negan*, for God's sake! Stop this."

But Negan didn't spare Gabriel a fleeting glance. He frowned at the young man below him, his steady gaze radiating quiet disappointment. Then he raised his hand, and like flipping a switch, the mob fell silent once more.

"Sir," Alden said bravely, his gaze flicking to the windows, to the swirling fog beyond. "This is bigger than all of us. The Widow's got people who can fight. I–"

"Our people," Negan cut him off.

Alden's lips parted, but he seemed to hesitate. His shoulders slumped. "What difference does it make?" he asked finally, like a man who had nothing left to lose.

Gabriel stared at his young friend as if seeing him for the first time. He didn't understand – why hadn't Alden said anything? True, Gabriel had been busy with his life here at the Sanctuary, too busy to think about home. He knew, of course, that Rick and Maggie had been quietly preparing for war. That Maggie had been poaching Saviors. Turning them. Right from under Negan's nose.

Or so they all thought.

Gabriel rubbed his sweaty palms against his slacks. He wished he'd known about Alden's connection to the Widow, to Maggie, but it occurred to him then that Alden had been singled out by the mob for a reason. That there were others among the Saviors just as "guilty", or at the very least, others who had considered switching sides.

And yet, Alden took it alone. He could have turned on them, named names, dragged others down with him. But he didn't.

"Please," Alden said, shifting lightly on his knees as he looked up at Negan. "We have to stop looking at each other as enemies. Whatever's out there–"

"– doesn't give a shit," Negan interrupted sharply. "About any of this shit. Let me be abundantly clear here," he continued, leaning over the railing. "This little uprising, it's been a real itch in my asshole. But, you know, bigger fish." He wriggled his fingers in a vague gesture. "Except that little itch turned out to be the mother of all hemorrhoids. Really, I should've done something sooner, nipped it in the bud, because let me tell you something, once you start on the Prep-H, that shit's gone fucking *chronic*." He paused, wincing a little. "That's not experience talking, by the way. That's just common sense."

Negan followed with a sigh. "Honestly, I don't mind a little pushback now and then. Keeps things interesting. But there's pushback – and then there's *pushback*." He leaned back, his voice becoming colder. "Specifically, the kind where there's a knife just waiting to *push* into my *back*. Call me crazy, but I don't fight epic wars alongside traitorous, sniveling little *bitches* who who sell their buddies out for a piece of ass. You see, in this world, you're only as strong as your weakest link – so what else is left for me but to Anne fucking Robinson this joint?"

Seeing the flicker of confusion on Alden's face, Negan paused before rolling his eyes. "This fucking generation," he huffed, dragging a hand down his face. "Look, kid. Maybe you are just the luckiest son of a bitch alive… or maybe you walked away because you made damn sure no one else could."

"You murderer scum," hissed Tim – a young worker Gabriel knew for his terribly crude sense of humor and, more importantly, for the brother he'd lost at the auto shop massacre. The very massacre Alden had reportedly survived shortly before Gabriel's arrival at the Sanctuary. He'd heard the story before, but never like this. Never with the implication that Alden wasn't *just* a survivor.

"I didn't kill them," Alden protested hoarsely, his throat bobbing. "The Widow didn't, either. I swear to God." His shoulders slumped, resignation settling over him. "But nothing I can say will make you believe me, will it?"

The worker took a menacing step toward Alden. Negan snapped his fingers, stopping him in his tracks.

"Let me lay it all down for you," Negan offered. "You see, I'm not a good man. That's the God honest truth. I was a piss-poor excuse for a father, and an even worse husband. Hell, that hasn't changed."

He slanted a glance toward the line of beautiful women standing along the stairway.

"I'm not perfect, and I sure as shit ain't no hero. But let's make something clear – this world, it doesn't need a hero. What it needs is a big dick asshole who can get shit *done*."

Smirking, Negan stepped back, spreading his arms wide.

"Any of you shitheads think you got what it takes to do what I do? Be my guest – take your best shot."

The crowd held its breath. No one moved.

Negan let out a scoff and dropped his arms, shaking his head like a disappointed father. "You people wanna survive this? Then wake up. Quit acting like a bunch of fucking pussies and make up your goddamn minds about who you wanna be when you grow up."

The response was instantaneous.

"*Negan!*"

"Because the time is nigh, ladies and gentlemen. Time to figure out exactly who you are, 'cause I know about me – I'm the guy monsters tell *monster-stories* about. That, my friends, is who the fuck I am." Then, voice low, taunting, demanding, he asked: "So what does that make you?"

"*Negan!*"

The look that spread across Negan's face was ugly in its viciousness. His teeth were bared in a wide grin, sharp and predatory, glinting in the unnatural glow of the fog. He fed off the energy, off their belief, their desperation.

"Then prove it," he said, spreading his arms wide, a king before his kingdom. "Show me you're not afraid to step the fuck up. That you're done hesitating." He allowed the silence to stretch, dragging the moment out before his voice dropped, slow and honeyed. "Show me that you are capable of goddamn *anything*."

Alden chose that moment to make a desperate bid for escape. He drove his elbow back, aiming for the nearest Savior's gut – but before he could connect, a worker's boot crashed into the small of his back, sending him sprawling.

"No!" Gabriel shouted, watching in horror as the mob descended on his young friend. "Stop! *What are you doing?*" His voice was drowned out by the chaos. He turned for the stairs once more, only to find his path blocked again. "Let me through," he demanded. He looked behind him. "Negan! You're making a mistake. Stop them, please!"

But Negan had other designs. He kept feeding the crowd's fury, his voice soaring above Alden's pained cries as he was kicked and jostled. "Are you gonna let just anyone stroll in and piss all over your home?" His words rang through the hall, reverberating off the walls. "Fuck, no! Because who the hell are you?"

"*Negan!*" they roared back, shaking the very foundation of the Sanctuary.

There was no hesitation, no doubt. The frenzy had reached a breaking point. It was no longer just a chant, no longer just words. It was a promise. A challenge.

A war cry.

Gabriel could only watch in muted horror, his mind numb, refusing to process the nightmare unfolding before him. It took a long time before Alden's cries faded into wet, choking gasps. Before his voice was finally drowned beneath the sound of fists and boots, of steel biting into flesh. Shock locked Gabriel's limbs in place, his breath trapped somewhere between his lungs and his throat. These were people he had come to know – to care about. The people who, before his very eyes, turned into bloodthirsty savages.

To see the dead tear someone apart was horrifying beyond measure.

To see the living…

Gabriel saw Dex – having only recently thanked Alden with such sincerity – raise a fistful of entrails in his fist. He saw Frankie – who never missed a prayer circle – drive her knife down, again and again, her white dress becoming soaked in blood and viscera. He saw Olga – that sweet old lady – spit on Alden's mutilated corpse.

And finally, he saw Negan.

“Smell that?” Negan asked, dimples flashing with that all too familiar, boyish grin. He waved a hand through the air, drawing it close for a slow, indulgent inhale, pleased as punch. “Cooked to perfection.”

Gabriel stared at him in stunned silence.

Still grinning, Negan slung an arm around Gabriel’s stiff shoulders, casually steering him away from the carnage. “Come on, let’s talk in private,” he said smoothly. “It’s finally time for your big solo, my man.”

Chapter End Notes

Would you kindly leave a comment? ❤️

The Angel of Thursday

Chapter Notes

PREVIOUSLY:

Negan is everyone's problem.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The metal cup frosted in Gabriel's hand. He stared at it through bloodshot eyes, his breaths coming out in swirling clouds of vapor.

The Sanctuary was far from quiet in the aftermath of Negan's speech; broken wails threaded through the halls like distant sirens, echoing along rusted metal pipes. The ghosts were restless – the living ones, whose bodies and minds had been touched by the fog in every sense of the word, lying broken and raving in their infirmary beds… and the dead. The dead lingered, too.

Unable to move on, they haunted the place they could not leave behind. Their ethereal forms rose from the cold depths of the basement, slipping past the thick salt lines meant to hold their rotting bodies. They flickered at the edges of vision, fingers raised in accusation. Trapped, as they all were.

Sometimes, they whispered.

Sometimes, they screamed.

Shivering, Gabriel knocked back the drink in a single swig, the cool liquor burning harshly down his throat. The floor was ice-cold beneath him where he sat slumped, back against the foot of the bed, but he lacked the will to lift himself from the ground.

"You could have stopped them," Gabriel said, his voice hollow. He carried more than just ghosts in his shadow.

"But I didn't," Negan drawled, lounging against the doorframe of Gabriel's room, just like he had a hundred times before. "And next time, I won't have to." He let out a short huff. "C'mon, you're a smart guy. Don't tell me I gotta spell it out for you."

For a moment, all Gabriel could do was shut his eyes.

"People are a resource," he whispered.

That phrase had been preached to him like scripture. And like a damned fool, Gabriel had listened.

Negan chuckled low in his throat. “See? You do get it.”

Pushing off the doorframe, Negan slid into the room, stopping just short of Gabriel’s outstretched legs. He peered down at him with a slight tilt of his head, oozing self-satisfaction, like a cat that had finally made it inside the birdcage.

“Kill one person,” Negan said, holding up a finger, “just *one*, and do it in a way that matters… and everyone else falls in line.” A slow grin crept across his face. “Shock and awe, Gabey. *Shock and awe.* You really think anyone here’s gonna question their loyalty again?”

“Is that what it's all about?” Gabriel snapped, despair and moonshine loosening his tongue. “Keeping your throne?”

Negan rolled his eyes. “It’s about *saving lives*.”

“What about their souls?” Gabriel whispered, a tremble in his voice.

There was a beat of silence.

“You’re exhausting, you know that?”

Gabriel pursed his lips but didn’t dignify it with a response. He was tired of all the games.

Negan let out a long sigh, dragging a hand down his bearded face. He paced the length of Gabriel’s sparse room until his gaze settled on the simple wooden cross mounted on the wall. Stepping forward, he plucked it down and turned it over in his hands, studying it in silence.

“You ever heard about the Trolley Problem?” Negan asked, apropos of nothing. He rocked on his heels, slipping a hand casually into his pocket, the picture of ease. “What am I saying – of course you have, you freakin’ nerd.” He grinned. “But just in case, let me lay it out for you real simple.”

Negan reached over and dragged the chair from Gabriel’s desk, flipping it around and plopping down in one single smooth motion, chest to backrest, the cross dangling loosely from his hand.

“You’ve got a choo-choo train, a juncture, and a good old-fashioned hostage situation.” He smiled as he slowly tapped the wooden cross against the chair. “Pull the lever, you switch tracks, and one poor schmuck eats it. Do nothing, and a whole lotta folks get wiped out instead.”

Negan waved the cross in Gabriel’s face. “What would Jesus do?” he asked before letting his voice drop into a low, needling drawl. “Better yet – what would *Gabriel* do? Hmm? Gonna just stand there and let all these poor people die?” His tone softened, coaxing. “Or are you man enough to pull that lever?”

“I’m not holding the lever,” Gabriel said, meeting Negan’s eyes without flinching. “You are.”

A slow smile spread across Negan’s face. “You’re goddamn right.”

Miserable, Gabriel slumped further against the foot of his bed. For the first time in a long time, he could see things clearly. All throughout this nightmare, Negan had worked tirelessly to solidify his control over the Saviors. And Gabriel had helped him do it. He had walked willingly at Negan's side, bolstering his twisted gospel before the entire compound.

"You used me," Gabriel said, shuddering. He pressed a shaking hand to his forehead as his breath caught painfully in his chest. "You used my faith. You–"

"Please, spare me the holier-than-thou horseshit, Padre," Negan huffed, rolling his eyes. "You got to play savior right alongside me, and you couldn't get enough of it. Every sermon, every platitude, every time someone came crawling your way – *'Bless me, Daddy, I've been such a big, bad Savior…* "

Gabriel flinched hard, eyes burning. "You're wrong," he whispered hoarsely, though even to his own ears, his voice lacked conviction. "I never wanted this."

He had truly believed, with every fiber of his being, that God had guided him to this place for a higher purpose. He'd felt it in his bones, in every prayer: he was meant to shepherd these people, to stand strong against evil.

But all along, he had been courting it. Nurturing it. God had brought him here – Gabriel had never doubted that – but had he misunderstood the purpose so terribly? Had he mistaken temptation for divine guidance?

How could he have been so blind?

"I never lied to you, Gabriel, not once." A cruel smirk tugged at Negan's lips as he pinned Gabriel under an appraising stare. His voice dropped, soft and taunting. "I didn't have to – because you *liked it*. Your life finally meant something here. "

Gabriel shook his head. "I just wanted to help people." But the words rang hollow, even to him. "You tricked me. You manipulated me, you–"

His darting gaze snagged on the jar Negan had gifted him, sitting innocently on the bedside table. The jar he'd nearly emptied, rubbing the balm into his aching muscles.

A sudden chill ran down his spine.

All those occult rituals, the symbols, the magic – could it be he'd fallen victim to something darker than persuasion? Had Negan bound him with more than words and charisma? Had he been *drugged?*

"What the hell was in that jar?" Gabriel demanded in a shrill voice, chest tightening in horror.

Negan frowned, following his gaze.

He blinked.

"That," Negan said slowly, disbelief thick in his voice as he enunciated each word with exaggerated patience, "is Tiger Balm. For your *back*." Anger flickered behind his eyes. "You

stupid, sanctimonious, son of a missionary pig-fucking *moron*."

Embarrassment curled Gabriel's toes.

"Oh," he said miserably.

"Wow. Now *that* was cleansing." Negan sighed deeply, leaning back in his chair and pressing a hand to his heart. "You have no idea how good it feels to finally tell you what a preachy little prick you are. Seriously, I've been bottling that up way too long."

Gabriel stared down at his lap, the bitter taste of failure lingering on his tongue. "I thought I was helping you become a better man. A better leader for your people." He had tried so desperately to redeem Negan, never realizing each effort was just another brick in the foundation of Negan's control. "But all I've done is give you legitimacy. These people… you've remade them in your image. They *worship* you."

"Aw, but that's just human nature, Gabey." Negan smiled, slow and indulgent. "When times get hard, people look for something to hold on to. Something to believe in." He rolled his hand in a vague gesture. "Or someone."

"You," Gabriel whispered.

Negan quirked an eyebrow. "Is that really so bad?"

"You're a monster," he spat.

Negan stood up sharply, the chair clattering to the floor. He came to stand over Gabriel, who forced himself not to squirm beneath the weight of Negan's stare.

"I may be a monster, but I'm the monster batting for your team," Negan said coldly. He cast a glance over his shoulder at the plastic-covered window and the swirling whiteness beyond. "In case you forgot," he added sarcastically.

For a moment, neither of them spoke.

Negan's expression softened.

"Look," Negan sighed, glancing down briefly. "I really do appreciate everything you've done for this place. For me. These folks, they genuinely do care about you." He smiled wryly. "And no, I didn't have to slip anyone *magic roofies* to get them to like you. The Saviors are your people now, for better or worse."

Gabriel stared at his empty cup in morose silence.

"For what it's worth, I am sorry about Alden," Negan said, his voice hesitant as if genuinely troubled. "I liked the kid, even if he was a traitor. Unfortunately, mercy doesn't get you far in this world." He waited until Gabriel looked up, then met his gaze evenly. "I think you know that."

Gabriel closed his eyes. He thought about Alden, about Glenn and Abraham, and everyone else lost to Negan's twisted ideology.

And he thought about the Satellite Outpost. About a man dragging himself across the ground while Gabriel read him his last rites – and gunned him down.

"Maybe mercy is what the world needs most of all," Gabriel said softly.

Negan tilted his head, studying him closely. "I know you ain't a Catholic, but I'm guessing you never got around to having children of your own."

He seemed to take Gabriel's silence as confirmation.

"See, when you've got kids, your first instinct is to keep them safe, no matter what. But you can't protect them forever. The world's gonna find them, sooner or later." He gave a small shake of his head. "So what do you do? You prepare them. You toughen them up. And yeah, maybe they hate you for it – but so what? It's not your job to be their pal. It's your job to raise them right."

Negan looked away for a moment, then let out a slow sigh. "That's what leadership is, too," he said quietly, turning the cross in his hands. "I keep my people alive, even if it costs me. I turned myself into a monster because that is what they need me to be. So that I can save them."

There was no mischief in his voice. He sounded sincere, like he truly believed every word.

"And I will save them, Gabriel. I'll save all of us," Negan murmured. His voice was firm, yet gentle – persuasive. "But I can't do it alone. I need your help."

Gabriel's throat felt tight. "What do you want from me?" he asked hoarsely.

Negan smiled.

Gabriel stepped through the gates of the Sanctuary, the cross held aloft in his hand. He heard the creak as they closed behind him, but he did not look back.

Dread simmered in the linings of his stomach and the recesses of his mind. The fog was heavier out here, flowing all around him, thick and suffocating. But even as his hand trembled and his heart fluttered in his chest, Gabriel's faith remained absolute. He no longer feared a fruitless death.

Gabriel marched forward, chin held high. By the time he finally looked over his shoulder, the Sanctuary had vanished. Only the bright, swirling whiteness remained.

"I sought the Lord, and he heard me," he whispered under his breath as he trudged through the endless fog, clinging to the psalm like a mantra. "And delivered me from all my fears."

He kept walking until his feet ached. The area beyond the compound was unfamiliar, but even so, he could feel that something wasn't quite right. He saw it in the unnatural shifting of

shadows, in the way the walls of each abandoned warehouse stretched impossibly high. In how the straight, narrow roads kept winding him back to the same broken streetlight, the same cracked section of sidewalk, the same desolate corpse.

Gabriel paused to collect his bearings, swiping a sleeve across his damp brow. The world out here was a strange collision of concrete and jungle, buildings half-consumed by creeping green, as if nature had begun reclaiming the ruins one brick at a time. Vines slithered beneath his feet and curled along every wall; whenever he turned his head, he could swear that they moved, shifting just at the edge of his peripheral vision.

But there was more than just vine moving in these haunted streets. Beyond the whispers of the wind, he could hear the faint shuffling of feet. His breath caught as shadowy figures emerged in the road ahead.

There had been others who'd braved the fog before. Most of them had found their way back to the Sanctuary… or had been returned. Some with scorched eyes and fractured minds, the beast's words spilling from their ravaged lips. Others, less fortunate, shambled to the gates on stiffened limbs, turned and yet strangely *whole*, bearing no marks save for the sickly pallor of the living dead… until the doctor cut them open and discovered that their *hearts* were missing, plucked clean from their chests by an unseen hand.

("Medically speaking, it's fascinating," the doctor had told Gabriel after one such autopsy, his tone filled with detached wonder. "Though I suppose this falls far more within your purview than mine.")

Now, Gabriel couldn't help but wonder – how many of these wandering phantoms had walked into the fog of their own free will… and how many had been *pushed out?*

How many had been dissenters, cast out in secret?

Shrouded by the fog, Gabriel attempted to slip past the dead unnoticed. Machete in one hand, cross in the other, he crept forward, breath held, boots crunching softly on broken debris. He turned a corner, pushing through a dense tangle of vegetation, vines snagging at his sleeves – and stumbled straight into the arms of a snarling walker.

He swore under his breath as his machete slipped from his hand, vanishing into the thick underbrush. They grappled for several long moments, the creature's teeth snapping inches from Gabriel's face, its mouth reeking of rot.

He recognized her face. Those empty, burned eyes.

Her name was Mara. He'd never forget the way she'd clutched at his arms, heat rising from her seared flesh, as the fog rose all around them.

She had been dead a long time, judging by the state of her. Her skin was sunken and split, streaked with dirt, her clothes tattered and clinging to her gaunt frame. He remembered how she'd vanished, slipping free of the restraints on her infirmary bed before running out into the fog. For a moment, all he could see was the woman who had once clutched at him, helpless and blind.

He drove the base of the cross into her empty eye socket and prayed she hadn't suffered long, out here on her own. Her body was still as it fell to the ground.

But there were others out there. He could hear them, the slow, dragging footsteps, the rasps of ruined throats. Heart beating fast in his chest, Gabriel dropped to his knees and swept his hands through the weeds and debris, fingers snagging on roots and damp leaves.

Nothing. The machete was nowhere to be found.

(Frankie had offered him her knife before he left. She'd wiped it clean and changed out of her white dress, but Gabriel still recoiled when he spotted the thin lines of red flecking her cuticles. He had turned her down.)

The dead had caught his scent. They were coming for him.

"They looked unto him, and were lightened," he muttered, pushing to his feet and stumbling forward, weaponless, the bloodied cross clutched to his chest. "And their faces were not ashamed."

Gabriel pushed through the fog, rushing forward with no clear direction. The choking blanket of white swallowed the world on all sides, thick and absolute. The road beneath him stretched and twisted as he moved, shifting underfoot like something alive. Buildings loomed in the distance, warped and off-kilter, while sidewalks and street signs buckled at strange angles, like fragments of a broken mosaic or the turning lens of a kaleidoscope.

He wiped at his eyes, but it made no difference.

His feet skidded on the slick ground as more shapes loomed from the fog, figures weaving in and out of focus, reaching for him with withered hands. He twisted away from one just as another seized his coat, tearing it at the shoulder before he could wrench free.

"This poor man cried, and the Lord heard him," he gasped, clinging to the hymn like a beacon, veering down an alley that hadn't been there a moment ago, forcing his body through rusted fencing and thorny vines. "And saved him out of all his troubles."

The wind whispered incomprehensibly in his ears. Gabriel kept going. He didn't know where he was heading, only that he couldn't stop.

Something stirred above him. A great arched shadow, impossibly vast. Lightning crackled in its wake, illuminating the fog in sharp, unnatural flashes. Gabriel stumbled back, colliding with the husk of an abandoned car, crouching low as if he could somehow hide from it.

A lightning bolt struck one of the walkers.

For a heartbeat, its skeleton flared before Gabriel's eyes, the body engulfed in a light so blinding it burned the walker's outline into his vision. It collapsed to the ground, a blackened, smoldering husk.

But the rest of the dead didn't seem to notice or care. They kept coming, driving him out of cover and back into the open. They seemed to sprout from the cracks in the asphalt, drawn to

the noise and the scent of fresh meat. Some of them he recognized – poor souls who had once tried to escape the Sanctuary's prison… or had been driven out. Sacrificed. The few for the good of the many.

Gabriel ducked beneath their clawing hands as he fled, eyes wide, straining to see through the impossibly thick fog. Suddenly, his foot twisted beneath him, caught on the edge of an open storm drain. A withered hand rose from its depths and clamped around his ankle. He swore, kicking wildly until he tore himself free.

The great arch swept overhead again. Gabriel glanced up in time to see another arch intersect the first, cutting across the sky like the ring of an armillary sphere, bursting in flashes of light that flooded his vision and brought tears to his eyes. He wrenched his gaze downward, a searing pain lancing through his skull.

Fingers scraped his back. Teeth snapped at the air where he had just been. A moan rose behind him, another in front.

He stumbled, the dead grasping at him from every side, just as a sound like a ship's massive horn thundered through the air. Clutching his head, the cross pressed tightly to his face, Gabriel forced his way blindly through the swarming dead. They surrounded him, their hands cold and brittle, clawing at his arms, his chest, his face.

"The angel of the Lord encampeth round about them that fear him," Gabriel shouted, the words lost to the deafening roar as his legs gave out beneath him. He knew they would be his last. "And delivereth–"

A voice exploded through his skull, shattering every thought with a single, booming command:

SHUT YOUR EYES.

Huddled on the ground in the midst of a ravenous horde, Gabriel obeyed.

He couldn't hear himself scream over the groan of the earth as light exploded behind his eyelids. Gabriel could feel it pass over him, *through* him, something vast and ancient. Its touch was a nuclear blast, and everything in its path was unmade in an instant.

When silence reigned once again, the first thing that struck him was the smell.

Gabriel opened his eyes to find the gaunt face of a corpse staring back at him, its blackened eyes still releasing faint trails of smoke. He scrambled back, heart pounding in his chest, only to collide with another dead body. He was surrounded by them – a sea of scorched corpses stretched out in every direction, their limbs twisted and frozen where they fell, their mouths still open in silent, final groans.

On unsteady feet, Gabriel rose, clutching the cross to his chest like a lifeline. He strained his eyes, but all he could see around him was white.

“I’ve come on behalf of the Sanctuary,” Gabriel called out, drawing on his courage even as the sound of his own voice felt strange in his ears. “Can we talk?”

He lifted the bloodied cross, turning slowly, scanning the fog for whatever was out there, watching him.

“Hello?” Gabriel tried again, feeling more than a little ridiculous. “Are you still there?”

Something shifted again, and for a moment, the entire sky was blackened by an immense shadow. Then, without warning, a great wind swept him off his feet. Gabriel was flung forward, hitting the asphalt hard, the breath knocked clean from his lungs.

Through his ears were bleeding, he could still make out the words:

COME THIS WAY.

Shaking, Gabriel pushed himself up onto his knees. He ran his tongue over his teeth, checking for anything loose or bleeding.

“Why should I do that?” he managed to croak, turning a trembling glare toward the sky even as the ground still shuddered beneath him.

For a moment, everything stopped. The quake, the piercing ringing in his ears. Head bowed, knees pressed to the broken earth before this unfathomable creature, Gabriel hesitantly lifted the cross into the air.

Then –

SO I DON’T HAVE TO KEEP SHOUTING.

Gabriel slowly lowered the cross.

Swallowing hard, he lifted himself to his feet and turned in the direction the creature had indicated, muttering the psalm anew under his breath. He walked on as the road sloped gently upward, stepping over the lightly smoking corpses in his path. All the while, he could feel eyes on him, watching him.

Not the dead. Not anymore.

Something else.

Still, he kept going. One foot in front of the other. Cross in hand, a verse on his lips.

Until he stopped dead, breath caught in his throat.

There was someone up ahead, just at the edge of visibility – a lone figure standing in the middle of the road, dark against the pale, swirling fog. Gabriel squinted, but could make out little more than a man’s motionless silhouette, his features lost to shadow, his form draped in a long coat that hung down to his knees.

The silhouette shifted slightly. “Hello.”

Gabriel flinched but caught himself, planting his feet and raising the cross between them like a barrier. “Stay right there!” he barked, his voice cracking slightly.

“That won’t be a problem,” the figure replied, a note of irritation in its voice. “This place is thoroughly warded against me. This is as close as I can get.”

The voice seemed… oddly familiar.

Frowning, Gabriel took a cautious step forward, eyes narrowed to slits as he studied the figure before him. It looked like a man. It sounded like one – albeit with the gravelly voice of a chain-smoker – but there was something about him, something just slightly *off*.

Not a man, but a creature, standing alone in the deep of the fog.

Gabriel’s fear was burning away, replaced by righteous fury. It welled up in his chest, steadying his breath, straightening his spine. This thing – this unholy demon – had no right to be here. No right to wear the shape of a man.

No right to torment them so.

“You don’t belong here,” Gabriel said firmly, lifting the cross higher. “In the name of the Lord, I cast you out. You are not welcome here. Return to the pit that spawned you.”

The figure tilted its head. “What?”

Gabriel took another step forward, voice rising with conviction. “I command you to leave!”

The creature shifted on its feet. “Uh, no.”

The cross shook in Gabriel’s hand. He drew in a steadying breath. “In the name of the Father–”

“Oh, this is awkward–”

“–and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit –”

“I’m not a demon, Gabriel.”

“–you will leave this place!”

There was a long beat of silence.

“How do you know my name?” Gabriel demanded, eyes narrowed.

The shadowed figure seemed to sigh with its entire body. “We’ve *met*.” There was a note of aggravation in the voice now. “And you pray… *very loudly.*”

The world seemed to tilt on its axis. Gabriel slowly lowered his arm, a dull pressure building behind his eyes. The righteous fury that had carried him moments ago was faltering, giving

way to a fog of confusion.

He was missing something. Something important.

It scratched at the back of his mind like an itch he couldn't reach.

"You've come on behalf of the Sanctuary," the creature said in a questioning tone. Though its features were obscured, it appeared to be studying him. "Does it mean you stand with them?"

Gabriel swallowed harshly. "I stand on the side of humanity."

"Very well," The creature sighed, almost disappointed. "You already know what I want – where is Scott?"

"Scott?" Gabriel echoed, confused.

Then it clicked – the boy.

Shame washed over him, filling him to his very toes. All this time, and he'd never even bothered to learn the boy's name.

"I need to know you won't harm him," Gabriel said in a rush, his heart thudding hard in his chest.

There was a beat.

"Harm him."

Gabriel took a step back, startled by the sudden vitriol in the creature's voice.

His *familiar* voice.

He frowned as recognition suddenly sparked in his mind. "Castiel?"

They *had* met before – briefly, back in Alexandria. The man had been brought in under such suspicious circumstances, barely clinging to life, his body a patchwork of mortal injuries. He looked like he'd been dropped from the sky and chewed up on the way down. They carried him in like a corpse, fully expecting him to die within the hour.

But he didn't. He lingered. And then, miraculously, he began to recover.

Gabriel remembered crowding the injured stranger's side, making polite conversation, sniffing him out on Rick's orders. He remembered inquiring about his rather *unusual* name.

Castiel, is it? After the Angel of Thursday?

And he remembered Carl and the other children, how fiercely they'd protected him. This stranger none of them had ever seen before.

Be not forgetful to entertain strangers.
For thereby some have entertained angels unawares.

“What are you?” Gabriel whispered. Even as he asked, he realized – he already knew.

But the answer came regardless.

Lightning split the sky, casting the fog in a blinding, otherworldly light. The air crackled – sharp, electric. Above the shadowed silhouette, two great banners began to unfurl, gliding through the swirling white mist, looming above the radiant figure. The brilliance shimmered brightest behind his head, a concentrated ring of light that flared like a burning sun

The banners rose higher – the shadows of two massive wings, arching into the heavens.

The ground bit into Gabriel’s knees. He didn’t remember falling. His hand curled around the cross, slick with sweat and blood, clutched so tightly his knuckles had gone white.

“You’ve come to bargain,” said the angel of the Lord, and his voice was full of anger. “*Speak*.”

Gabriel opened his mouth, but for a moment, nothing came. He bowed his head instinctively, eyes wide and wild.

“Lift the siege,” he gasped, the words tumbling from his lips. His own voice sounded distant, like it came from someone else entirely. “Lift it, and Negan will give you what you want.”

Something in the air *shifted*.

Gabriel’s ears popped painfully as pressure built around him. He clutched at the ground, fingers digging into the asphalt, as the wind threatened to knock him off his knees, howling like it had a voice of its own.

His eyes remained shut, clenched tight against the storm and the light and the unbearable weight of judgment. He did not know whether to pray or to beg for forgiveness.

“About damn time,” the angel huffed.

Trembling, Gabriel slowly lifted his gaze.

And for the first time in a long time, he could see the sky.

Chapter End Notes

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